



About time: European Parliament finally greenlights negotiations on water pollutants

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Brussels, 4 December 2024 | Today, the European Parliament's environment committee gave the green light to start trilogue negotiations on the update of EU water pollution standards. While this formal approval to proceed towards adoption is welcome and long-awaited, the multiple delays that have plagued this file risk jeopardising meaningful action on water pollution for the coming decade.

More than two years ago, the European Commission proposed updating the list of priority pollutants regulated under the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The update included several substances of known concern, such as PFAS ('forever chemicals'), glyphosate and pharmaceuticals. Although this proposal was more than welcome, it came at a late stage, falling short of the legally mandated six-year review cycle.

Progress on this critical issue has lagged behind other environmental priorities. For instance, companion proposals on urban wastewater and air quality, introduced on the same day, have been adopted. By contrast, the water pollution file suffered inaction under the Swedish EU Council Presidency and was further stalled when the European Parliament's ENVI Committee delayed its agreement to proceed with trilogues until today. As a result, negotiations to finalise the text are unlikely to start before January next year.

These delays have significant consequences. Member States are soon due to plan their next River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) for the period 2028 - 2033. If measures on new pollutants are not included in these RBMPs, their potential to combat chemical pollution will be severely undermined. Without these updates, the plans risk becoming empty shells that fail to protect European waters.

Sara Johansson, Senior Policy Officer for Water Pollution Prevention, European Environmental Bureau, said: *"With today's vote, the long-overdue adoption of updated EU water pollution standards moves a step closer. Now all eyes are on the Polish presidency to conclude the trilogue negotiations and on Member States to commit to taking measures on*

PFAS, pharmaceuticals and pesticides to limit the emissions, discharges and losses of these harmful substances in the next River Basin Management Plans.”

Manon Rouby, Policy Officer & Legal Adviser, PAN Europe, said: *“This vote marks a step in the right direction, given the growing concerns about water pollution from harmful substances such as PFAS, TFA and pesticides. However, time is running out. The EU institutions and Member States must act urgently and ambitiously to ensure these new standards are adopted in time for the next River Basin Management Plans.”*

Codruța Savu, Freshwater Policy Officer, WWF European Policy Office, said: *“Water pollution is not just an environmental issue — it’s a growing public health and economic challenge affecting millions of citizens. Harmful substances like PFAS, glyphosate and pharmaceuticals are already contaminating our waters, threatening the EU’s drinking water supplies, ecosystems and livelihoods. EU institutions and Member States must seize this opportunity to adopt and enforce water pollution standards that truly reflect the urgency of this crisis.”*

Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Officer, Surfrider Foundation Europe, added: *“Today’s vote paves the way for the hopefully rapid finalisation of negotiations on this much-needed text. The hydrosphere is one, and the state of degradation and chemical pollution of our blue spaces and ultimately of our ocean calls for an acceleration and increased ambition in the measures we take to prevent and limit pollution, for the benefit of our economy and society.”*

The urgent need to address PFAS pollution

While EU a broad PFAS restriction is urgently needed, there is a lot that Member States can do in the framework of river basin management to limit the emissions, discharges and losses, such as tightening discharge permits or introducing national bans on problematic substances such as PFAS-containing pesticides

This is exactly what Dutch water suppliers recently requested in [a letter](#) to the German environment minister, Ms Steffi Lemke, asking that she take action to tighten industrial PFAS discharge permits into the Rhine as this threatens drinking water quality further downstream. However, without agreed-upon EU water quality standards, the legal pressure on Member States to do so is lacking.

Now all eyes will be on the Polish presidency of the EU Council to lead the trilogues and, while upholding existing environmental safeguards, ensure that an agreement is reached before summer so that Member States have time to include measures on the new water pollutants in the next RBMPs covering the period 2028 to 2033.

[ENDS]

Notes to editor:

- [The EEA State of Water report](#) showed that over 70% of surface waters and nearly 25% of groundwaters are not in a good chemical status. However, this is currently only assessed against 45 substances for surface water, while for groundwater only pesticides and nitrate have EU-wide quality standards.
- The European Parliament adopted its position on the Commission's proposal in September 2023, and the Council adopted its mandate in June 2024.
- The two other initiatives that were presented with the proposal for updated EU water pollution standards in the Zero Pollution Package on 22 October 2022 were adopted by the Council on 5 November 2024 (urban wastewater) and 14 October (air quality).
- Several other files pending from the past mandate have passed committee votes to open trilogues earlier this autumn, e.g. Toy Safety Directive (5 September), Soil Monitoring Law and Waste Framework Directive (21 October)
- The [latest Eurobarometer](#) showed that 78% of Europeans want to see more EU-level action on water pollution.

NGOs and the water sector policymakers to prioritise the effective implementation of the proposed new pollutants in the next RBMPs. See NGO [recommendations](#) for the upcoming trilogues and [joint water sector-NGO letter](#) to the rapporteur and shadows

For further information, please contact:

- Ben Snelson benedict.snelson@eeb.org
- Manon Rouby manon@pan-europe.info
- Alejandra Morales amorales@wwf.eu