

European Bathing Water Quality Report 2023: the impacts of water pollution on health ignored

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The [2023 report on the quality of European bathing waters in 2022](#) has just been published. Surfrider Foundation Europe welcomes this annual exercise from the European Environment Agency and the European Commission but wishes to point out some of its pitfalls: the analyses are based on only 2 bacteriological control criteria and usually spans over just a few months within the year.

In light of the recent publication of the summary report of the Open Public Consultation on the review of the Bathing Water Directive, the NGO calls for the assessment of bathing water quality in Europe to better reflect all sources of pollution and their impact on human health and the environment and stresses a "concerning delay" at a time when the proposal for a revised Directive is still awaited.

A report with many shortcomings

The day after World Ocean Day, the European Environment Agency (EEA) publishes its annual report on bathing water quality in Europe. According to the report, **85,7%** of bathing sites in Europe were of excellent quality in 2022 and 95.9% of them meet the minimum standards.

Despite the apparent good news, this figure masks a much more nuanced situation: "In terms of controlling bathing water quality and classifying sites, **this report essentially reflects the risks of bacteriological contamination of faecal origin. The assessment is based on 2 indicators** defined in the legal provisions of the European Directive on the management of bathing water quality (2006/7/EC) which have hitherto been considered by the European authorities as having the most direct effect on human health: *Escherichia coli* and intestinal enterococci", says Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Campaigner for Surfrider Foundation Europe.

"Official analyses as they are currently carried out **cannot give a full picture of the state of our bathing and recreational sites**. On the one hand, algal blooms and plastic waste are only included in beach profiles or visually inspected. On the other hand, chemical pollution is not considered at all. Furthermore, the assessment of bathing water is most of the time relying on samples taken just over 3 or months during the summer and only at bathing sites identified as such. Surfrider Foundation Europe would like to point out that bathing is not the only popular activity taking place in our lakes, rivers and on our coasts. **There are in fact many water sports activities taking place throughout the year**, often in sites distinct from the areas used for bathing. Recreational users also deserve to be informed about the water quality of their site. "Is it fair to say that 85,7% of European waters are of excellent quality under these conditions?", asks Lucille Labayle.

According to the EEA, the quality of coastal and inland waters has remained relatively stable since 2015. Such a steady number should not be cause for celebration according to Surfrider Foundation Europe. Member States and managing authorities should be given **additional resources and tools** to rapidly rehabilitate and continuously improve the quality of their bathing and recreational waters as is already done in some cities.

Societal issues are insufficiently taken into account

In June 2021, as part of the preparatory working groups for the current revision of the [European Bathing Water Quality Directive 2006/7/EC](#), Surfrider Foundation Europe submitted its [European Manifesto for Healthy Waters](#) to the European Commission, calling on the European Union to seize this revision as an opportunity to reconsider the monitoring of bathing water quality on the basis of **7 recommendations**. In particular, the organization is calling for the **extension of controlled areas**, the **introduction of year-round monitoring**, and **improved information to the public**.

[Detailed measures of the "European Manifesto for Healthy Waters" can be found here](#)

Among its key demands, the NGO is calling for the **addition of new parameters to be monitored**, such as waste, harmful algal blooms but also chemical contaminants, as these are still not included in the Directive's scope. It seems indeed difficult to talk about excellent bathing water quality when there is widespread concern and doubt about the impact of this form pollution on health.

Two years later, **while a proposal to revise the Directive is still pending**, the European Commission published the results of its Open Public Consultation. "Surfrider Foundation Europe welcomes this news. Echoing the recommendations in our Manifesto, the findings of this report underline the need to make the monitoring of bathing water quality in Europe more adapted to our times and more protective of the health of users", says Lucille Labayle. Results of the consultation show that **two-thirds of respondents consider that the current monitoring parameters are insufficient** or could be improved. Similarly, almost half of them felt that emerging risks such as antibiotic resistance, microplastics or pharmaceutical substances and other emerging contaminants were not sufficiently considered by the Directive from 2006.

A long overdue review

As highlighted by today's report from the EEA, the revision of the Bathing Water Directive is taking place in the wider context of the **European Green Pact** and its **Zero Pollution Action Plan**, which calls for an environment toxic-free of toxic substances for citizens. Several initiatives have been launched within this framework to adapt European legislation on water to current societal needs and to the problem of emerging substances, on which Surfrider Foundation Europe has also taken a position. These include the revision of the lists of pollutants for surface and groundwater under the Water Framework Directive and the recast of the **Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive**. In contrast, the revision of the Bathing Water Quality Directive is stalling. Even though updates of the formers will indirectly benefit the implementation of the latter, requirements on the monitoring and classification of our bathing and recreational waters need to be revised quickly.

While the European Commission had committed to assess the need to consider new parameters for measuring bathing water quality by 2023, it was finally announced a few months ago that **a proposed revision would not see emerge before the European elections in 2024** (see our reaction [here](#)). "With the Green Pact and the Zero Pollution Action Plan, the Commission opted for an ambitious policy. It is frustrating to see that some of these commitments will not be met on time and keep falling further behind schedule. We urgently need to work towards a new, strong Directive that will protect the health of the Ocean and of European citizens", says Lucille Labayle.

Our water quality experts remain at the disposal of journalists for any further interview requests.

About Surfrider Foundation Europe

Surfrider Foundation Europe, an NGO created in 1990, works to protect the oceans, the coastline, the waves and their users. For 30 years, with a team of experts and 50 volunteer branches in 12 European countries, the association has been working with stakeholders (citizens, private and public sectors) on several major issues: aquatic waste, coastal development, climate change, water quality and user health. Find out more about the association at <https://surfrider.eu/en> or [via this video](#)

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