

# The European Water Resilience Strategy

*A BRIEFING FOR ADVISORY COUNCILS*

EUROPEAN ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COUNCILS NETWORK



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# SUMMARY

The EEAC aims to keep advisory councils informed of the latest developments in sustainable development and the environment in Europe and internationally. This briefing breaks down the context and contents of the European Commission's European Water Resilience Strategy, adopted in June of 2025, and how advisory councils can use it in their work.

The Water Resilience Strategy consolidates the existing EU water acquis into a single framework, with three overarching goals: restoring the water cycle, fostering a water-smart economy, and ensuring clean and affordable water and sanitation for all. These objectives are supported by five enabling pillars—governance, finance, digitalisation, research and innovation, and security and preparedness—under which more than 50 flagship actions will be carried out. In a context of intensifying floods, droughts, pollution, and ecosystem degradation, the strategy identifies water as a systemic risk and a cross-cutting policy area, for which implementation of existing legislation must be drastically scaled up. This will require significant action at the national level, for which the role of advisory councils is essential.

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Any opinions expressed in this report do not represent the Network or its members.

Many thanks to Wim van Gils (Minaraad), Folmer de Haan (Rli), Milo Fiasconaro (APE), Marta Mansanet Canovas (CoR), and Axelle Griffon (CEMR CCRE) for their insights.

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# 1. Behind the strategy

## 1.1 Water resilience in Europe

Resilience refers to the ability of a system to withstand, recover from, and adapt to disturbances, while maintaining key functions or structures. In the context of water, this means continuing to sustain socio-ecological systems—meeting the hydrological needs of the biosphere and human society—in spite of man-made or natural shocks. Achieving and maintaining water resilience is essential in a context of global climatic change and economic and demographic pressures, to maintain the social, economic and environmental functions of water: drinking water, sanitation, irrigation, energy production, ecosystem stability, to name only a few.

The European Environment Agency (EEA) outlined in their 2024 'Europe's State of Water' report three primary challenges facing water in Europe, the result of persistent human-induced pressures and the intensifying impacts of climate change [9]. These are:

1. *Protecting and restoring aquatic ecosystems;*
2. *Achieving the zero-pollution ambition;*
3. *Adapting to water scarcity, drought, and flood risks.*

Addressing these challenges is necessary to strengthen Europe's water resilience, mitigating the effects of decades of lax pollution and abstraction controls, and the extreme climatic events and ecological pressures facing the fastest-warming continent globally.

### **Challenge 1: Protecting and restoring aquatic ecosystems**

The first challenge refers to the widespread degradation of groundwater and terrestrial and coastal surface waters, along with the habitats and species that depend on them. Fewer than 40 percent of surface water bodies achieved a good or high ecological status in 2021, primarily due to pervasive pollution, over-abstraction, and other human-driven pressures. Poor water quality is further aggravated by human interference to water courses, such as river damming for hydroelectric power, the drainage of floodplains and wetlands for agriculture, and river channelling for navigation. These hydromorphological alterations affect 51 percent of surface waters in the EU, and disrupt habitats, species composition, and the movement of water, sediment, nutrients, and organisms.

The ecological consequences are significant: 83 percent of protected river, lake, alluvial, and riparian habitats are in 'poor' or 'bad' conservation status, revealing substantial degradation of European aquatic ecosystems despite ongoing conservation efforts. Approximately 80 percent of freshwater and marine fish and 60 percent of amphibian species also face poor or bad conservation status, while migratory freshwater fish populations have declined 93 percent over the past fifty years. Climate change will exacerbate these existing vulnerabilities by altering

temperature and precipitation patterns, facilitating the spread of invasive species, and changing species migration dynamics. Without significant resilience-building measures, Europe's aquatic biodiversity crisis will continue to intensify.

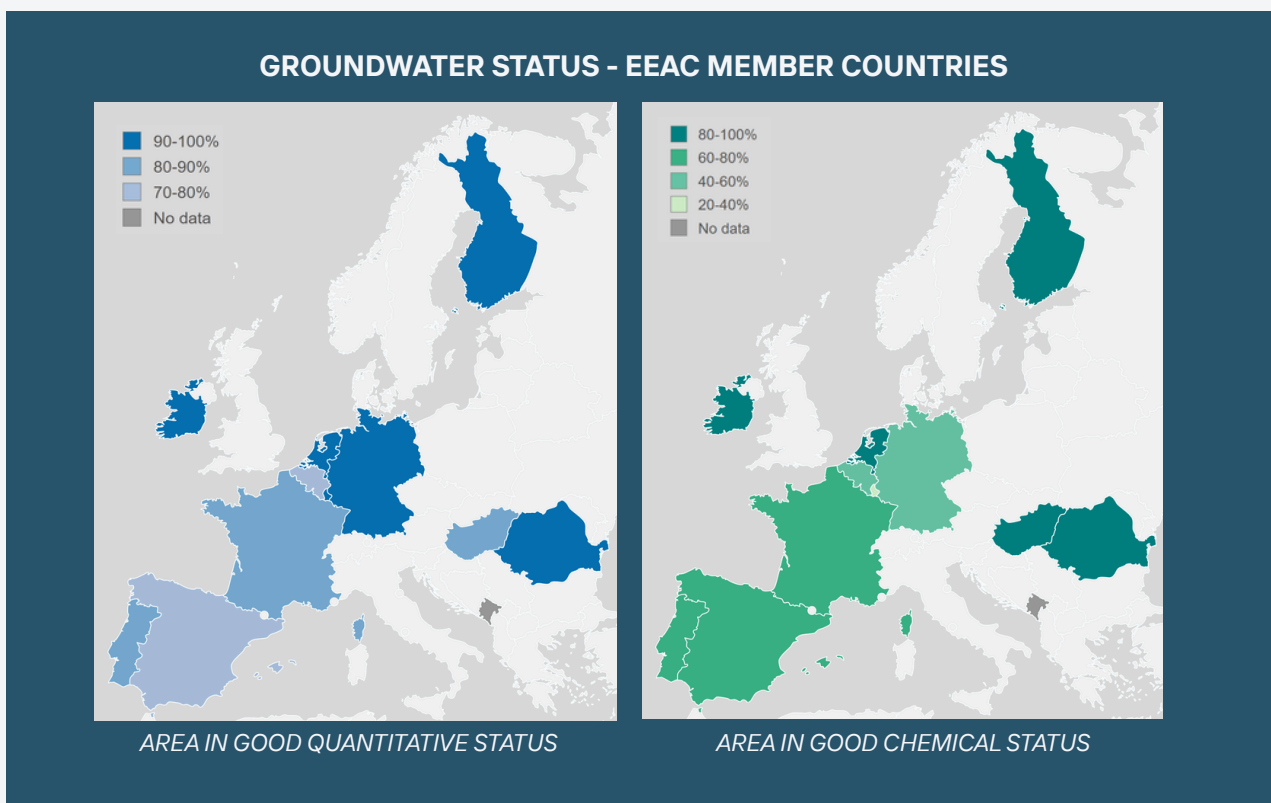
**Challenge 2: Achieving the zero pollution ambition**

The chemical status of European waters also shows significant shortcomings: only 29 percent of surface water bodies and 77 percent of groundwater achieved a 'good' chemical status. This pollution stems above all from nutrients and pesticides released by agriculture, as well as diffuse atmospheric pollution from coal combustion for energy production and urban wastewater and storm water overflows. Nonetheless, progress is being made, as improved knowledge of chemicals and toxicity has led to stricter environmental standards. The Water

Framework Directive, which determines the parameters for water bodies' ecological classification, stipulates that good status can only be achieved if all biological and chemical criteria meet the 'good' level. When long-lived, persistent pollutants such as mercury and brominated flame retardants are excluded, 80 percent of surface water bodies achieve 'good' status. These pollutants are extremely difficult to mitigate as little can be done when they are already released, but following the Pareto principle, prioritising efforts to prevent these two substances from entering water bodies could substantially reduce overall pollution levels.

**Challenge 3: Adapting to water scarcity, drought, and flood risks**

Water quality in Europe poses problems, but so does water quantity. Water stress currently affects 20 percent of the territory and 30 percent of the population



Own elaboration [27]

annually. In 2021, 91 percent of groundwater bodies were reported to be in good quantitative status, but the EEA casts doubt on this figure, expressing a need to reconsider trend assessment. Groundwater abstraction beyond aquifer recharge rates—especially for agriculture, the largest water consumer and second largest abstractor in the EU—remains a principal threat facing European groundwater bodies.

Climate change is increasing temperatures and modifying precipitation patterns, increasing demand for abstraction, while simultaneously slowing aquifer recharge. The worst affected region is southern Europe, which is seeing the greatest temperature increase and precipitation reduction, exacerbated by water-intensive agricultural practices and a reliance on fossil groundwater. Water scarcity conditions are no longer seasonal, but now prevalent almost the entire year.

Nonetheless, even in other parts of Europe where precipitation is not projected to decrease, it will decline in the summer and fall more intensely the rest of the year. This will reduce river discharge and groundwater recharge and increase the risk of flood and drought events. In recent years, Europe has been affected by a number of severe drought and flood events, such as the continent-wide drought of 2022 that cost up to 40 billion euros, and the 2021 flood event in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands that cost 44 billion euros. Unless mitigation and adaptation measures are stepped up, the social and economic consequences are due to worsen, with costs from flooding predicted to increase six-fold by 2100.

### **The European water policy landscape**

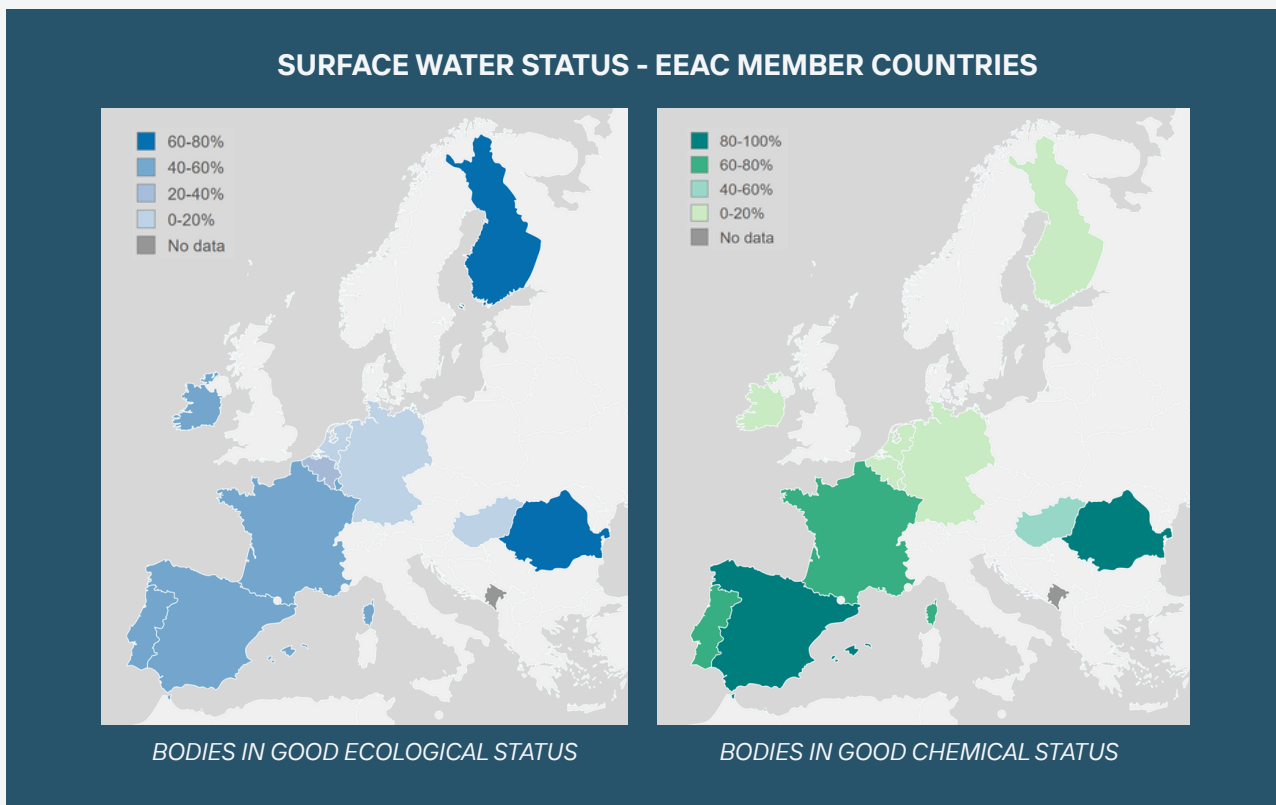
EU water policy has historically been fragmented and incremental [8,10]. Quantitative water management focused primarily on the supply side, and droughts and floods were addressed through reactive crisis management measures. The Water Framework Directive of 2000, the foundation of recent EU water policy, started to introduce demand management, but its primary focus is qualitative, setting targets for the ecological and chemical status of surface and groundwater bodies. It has been followed by a sprawling array of directives including the Groundwater Directive of 2006, the Floods Directive of 2007, the revised Drinking Water Directive of 2020, and the revised Urban Wastewater Directive of 2024.

This legislation has suffered from uneven compliance, insufficient funding, delayed implementation, and a lack of integration of water concerns into sectoral policies, as well as a lack of dedicated, centralised management within the EU. Demand management is still lacking, and legislation tends to neglect water quantity. There has been a paradigm shift with regards to water risks from crisis management to risk management, but this hasn't translated into cross-sector action (i.e. land use decisions).

With the arrival of the 2024 to 2029 EU Commission mandate, water policy was consolidated under the portfolio of Commissioner Jessika Roswall: *Environment, Water Resilience, and Circular Economy*. This is the first time water policy has been explicitly named in a cabinet, and the adoption of *water resilience* suggests a shift to a broader, more holistic approach, an attempt to

escape the silo thinking that has hampered previous initiatives. A key element of the cabinet's workplan has been the adoption of the European Water Resilience Strategy in June 2025, an effort to consolidate and improve the implementation of existing water legislation, and close gaps in compliance, quantitative management, data and monitoring, and investment.

It contextualises water resilience within the other challenges facing the EU: competitiveness, security, climate adaptation, and pushes for the integration and mainstreaming of water issues across sectors. Nevertheless, it introduces no new legislation, no specific binding targets, and no specific dedicated funding. Is it real change or just repackaging?



Own elaboration [27]

## 1.2 The Water Resilience Strategy

The Water Resilience Strategy (WRS) [5] consists of three main objectives:

1. *Restoring and protecting the water cycle as a basis for sustainable water supply;*
2. *Building a water-smart economy that leaves no one behind, supports EU competitiveness and attracts investors;*
3. *Securing clean and affordable water for all, empowering consumers and other users.*

The Commission also identified five enabling areas to target actions, in order to meet these objectives. These are:

1. *Governance and implementation to boost change;*
2. *Finance, investments and infrastructure to achieve a stable supply;*
3. *Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence to accelerate and simplify sound water management;*
4. *Research and innovation, water industry and skills to strengthen competitiveness;*
5. *Security and preparedness to boost collective resilience.*

A final section focuses on global action to promote water resilience beyond Europe. The strategy demonstrates the Commission's intent to align the priorities of the 2024–2029 agenda—simplification, digitalisation, competitiveness, and security—with the goal of strengthening water resilience across Europe. The result of a lengthy review and call-for-evidence process, it suggests a concerted effort to

produce a framework that is robust and responsive to the evolving water-related challenges facing Europe, but it is not without weaknesses. A mid-term review of the strategy will take place in 2027 and a full evaluation of progress in 2029. From December 2025, a Water Resilience Forum will be hosted every two years.

### **Objective 1: Restoring and protecting the water cycle as basis for sustainable water supply**

The first objective seeks to address issues such as overexploitation, mismanagement, pollution, climate change, and environmental degradation, that have negatively impacted the water cycle, as well as water quality and quantity. It calls for better implementation of existing legislation, notably the *Water Framework Directive*, the *Flood Management Directive*, and the *Nature Restoration Regulation* (with integration of water resilience into National Restoration Plans), as well as the revision of the *Marine Strategy Framework Directive*.

Knowledge support will be improved, with the development of indicators for water scarcity, and technical guidance on Drought Management Plans. Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are highly encouraged, for example improving freshwater retention on land through the development of a Sponge Facility and the promotion of sponge cities. The strategy calls for careful evaluation of hard engineering measures such as reservoirs and dams, and a focus on holistic, integrated management of freshwater and inland waterways. Regarding water pollution, cleanup efforts should follow the

polluter-pays principle. The Commission also expressed willingness to establish a public-private initiative to develop technological solutions for addressing PFAS and other persistent chemicals, contingent on investor interest.

**Objective 2: Building a water-smart economy that leaves no one behind, supports EU competitiveness and attracts investors**

In line with the overarching focus on competitiveness for the 2024-2029 Commission mandate, the strategy underscores the role of water resilience in

strengthening industrial performance. Its foundation lies in the '*Water Efficiency First*' principle, which prioritises reducing demand and over-abstraction before improving efficiency through design and reuse, and expanding supply only as a last resort. This applies to all sectors of the economy, but especially the most intensive water users. To this end, the Commission intends to propose water consumption standards for water intensive operations such as data centres, semiconductor manufacturing, and hydrogen production. For sectors such as agriculture, energy production, and

**Box 1: Existing legislation addressing the water cycle**

**The Water Framework Directive (WFD)** [11] of 2000 established a framework for the protection of Europe's water bodies, with the objective of improving the aquatic environment, reducing pollution, and mitigating the effects of floods and droughts. It assesses the ecological quality of surface and ground waters, setting a target of all water bodies achieving at least 'good' status by 2015. Obligations for Member States include managing pollution at its source, addressing hazardous substances, complying with standards for protected areas, protecting water abstraction points to maintain their quality, and monitoring the status of their water bodies. Although the Directive mostly addresses water quality, it does also stipulate that Member States should provide incentives for efficient water use.

Europe's groundwater has shown gradual improvement, reaching 86 percent in good chemical status and 95 percent in good quantitative status in 2021. The 2015 target for surface water, however, has been missed by a substantial margin: as of 2021, only 39.5 percent of surface water bodies achieved a good ecological status, and only 26.8 percent were in good chemical status, a deterioration of 6.8 percent from 2015.

Nonetheless, these figures do hide improvements in biological and chemical quality, due to the WFD's stipulation of a water body only achieving good status if all biological and chemical criteria meet the 'good' level. The Commission attributes the insufficient implementation of the WFD to the overlooking of groundwater, insufficient funding, underestimation of the effort required, and a lack of prioritisation and integration of water objectives into other policy areas. The Water Resilience Strategy therefore maintains the WFD as the foundation for its first objective but seeks to close the implementation gap and step up enforcement (*see Enabling Area 1*).

**The Flood Directive** [12] followed the WFD in 2007 and expands on flood risk reduction, which the WFD only mentioned in passing. It maintains the WFD's use of River Basin Districts as a core administrative unit, which helps to integrate flood management planning into more general water policy. Member States are required to prepare Flood Risk Management Plans, which were intended to slot into the River Basin Management Plans mandated by the WFD, for an integrated overall river basin management. These Flood Risk Management Plans must account for prevention and preparedness as well as protection against flood risk, an early example of a water policy stipulating proaction as well as reaction, a key component of water resilience.

The Flood Directive also inexplicitly refers to Nature-based Solutions, notably floodplain restoration and improvement of terrestrial water retention: the WRS emphasises the use of NbS as a priority where possible. The WRS acknowledges that insufficient implementation of the Flood Directive has contributed to flood vulnerability in Europe, and therefore lays out an array of actions in line with the recommendations of the Flood Directive, even using Flood Risk Management Plans to determine priorities for enforcement (*see Enabling Area 5*).

**The Nature Restoration Regulation** [18] of 2024 sets binding targets for ecosystem restoration by 2030. This includes restoring at least 25,000 kilometres of rivers to a free-flowing state by 2030, which would reduce flood risk and drought impacts and improve water quality, increasing overall water resilience. The Regulation also includes the restoration of marine ecosystems and terrestrial ecosystems including wetlands, rivers, and lakes, setting regular targets up to 2050. For wetlands, it goes even further, mandating not only the restoration of existing areas but also the re-establishment of lost wetland habitats. The WRS incorporates these targets and stresses the necessity of incorporating water resilience into Member States' National Restoration Plans, which as per the Nature Restoration Regulation must be developed by 2026.

**The Marine Strategy Framework Directive** [13], published in 2008, aims to improve and maintain the marine environment, setting a goal for Member States to achieve good environmental status for marine waters by 2020. The Water Resilience Strategy acknowledges explicitly the failure to meet this goal, and reiterates the findings of the Commission's implementation report from earlier in 2025. The report concluded that the Directive lacks clearly enforceable provisions, a clear definition of good environmental status, and alignment with other legislative frameworks. The WRS therefore resolves to revise the Directive to improve implementation, notably by reducing reporting requirements.

industrial processes, capacity building is needed for safe water reuse. The *Common Agricultural Policy* (CAP) already provides support for water efficiency in

agricultural practices and investments, and the revised *Industrial Emissions Directive* will require large industrial actors to reduce water demand and

improve water efficiency and reuse. A public-private initiative is also being considered to promote investment in affordable dry-cooling technologies, which would reduce the impact of data centres and certain water-intensive industrial processes.

The Commission proposes the use of smart water metering to monitor water availability and abstractions, and to improve leakage levels in public water supply, when combined with remote sensing. An EU-wide threshold for water supply leakage levels will be set by 2028, and Member States who exceed it will have until 2030 to present national action plans for leakage reduction. Finally, while increasing supply remains secondary to

demand management, the Commission will support innovation in desalination to mitigate environmental impacts and integrate renewable energies.

### **Objective 3: Securing clean and affordable water for all, empowering consumers and other users**

The third objective of the strategy consolidates a range of existing legislative instruments. On the consumer side, the *Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation* is intended to shift demand towards more water-efficient products. As per the strategy, public awareness and engagement are also central to effective water management, notably through the full implementation of public information and transparency requirements, and the

#### **Box 2: Existing legislation for the water-smart economy**

**The Common Agricultural Policy** [7] for 2023 to 2027 includes among its conditionality rules for beneficiaries to receive payments requirements to control abstraction levels and phosphate and nitrate water pollution, and to maintain buffer strips along water courses. As the WRS acknowledges, agriculture makes up 51 percent of all EU water consumption, and the CAP should therefore provide more support for water resilient farming practices. The Strategy calls for the use of CAP funding for capital-intensive drip irrigation and water reuse systems alongside the promotion of organic farming. The agricultural aspects of the Strategy focus more on technical solutions than Nature-based solutions, compared to the rest of the text. In line with the recommendations of the Strategy, proposals so far suggest that the 2028-2034 CAP will shift towards an incentive basis, paying farmers who implement climate actions, and the next CAP will incorporate mandatory requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

**The revised Industrial Emissions Directive** [17] of 2024 controls industrial emissions on the environment, including to water. Its integrated permitting system includes permits setting limits for water discharges and the Directive requires pre-treatment of industrial wastewater in some cases. Since the 2024 revision, the Directive also addresses water quantity in addition to quality, setting mandatory water consumption performance targets for certain industrial installations and introducing stricter reporting rules for water use and discharges. The WRS is banking on this revision to bridge the implementation gap for water resilience in industry.

involvement of citizens in River Basin and Flood Risk Management Plans. Within the built environment sector, the revised *Energy Performance of Buildings Directive* introduces provisions on hot water efficiency, while the *New European Bauhaus* will begin to integrate water resilience. With regards to pricing, the *Water Framework Directive* encourages sound national water pricing policies, based on a fair cost recovery and the polluter pays principle. Complementing this, the revised *Drinking Water* and *Urban Wastewater Directives* ensure regular and comprehensive information on water consumption and pricing.

### **Enabling Area 1: Governance and implementation to boost change**

A key priority will be to close the implementation and funding gaps that persist across existing water legislation. Enforcement efforts must be strengthened at the Member State level, notably through Structured Dialogues, with support available via the Technical Support Instrument. The Commission also intends to simplify the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, electronic reporting under the Water Framework Directive, and potentially the Extended Producer Responsibility system within the revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

#### **Box 3: Existing legislation for empowering consumers**

**The Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)** [16] of 2024 sets eco-design requirements for a range of products sold on the EU market throughout their lifecycles, including a requirement on water use and efficiency. It also identifies water use and consumption as a fundamental parameter in order to improve product sustainability. The WRS uses the ESPR as a regulatory framework to achieve its third objective, which relates to circular water economy. The strategy stipulates that any new or updated requirements under the ESPR must seek to reduce the water footprint of products, an important step to increase the offer of water-smart products on the market.

**The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive** [15], revised in 2024, addresses the built environment, Europe's largest energy consumer, seeking to achieve a zero-emission building stock by 2050. It identifies domestic hot water generation as a key course of energy consumption to reduce. Member States' National Building Renovation Plans must include programmes addressing water treatment. The strategy notes that water and energy saving "should always go hand in hand" in the built environment sector, a nod to Commissioner Roswall's objective to elevate water to the same level of importance as energy in the European agenda.

**The Drinking Water Directive** [14], recast in 2020, sets minimum quality standards for water intended for human consumption. Like the WFD, it obliges risk management at abstraction points, and throughout the supply chain. It also mandates the reduction of leakages in water supply networks, and it requires active, transparent dissemination of

information about water quality and pricing to consumers. It is for these two points in particular that the strategy co-opts the Directive, requiring Member States with excessive leakage levels to set Action Plans by 2030 and requiring them to set up transparent drinking water bills by 2027 to increase consumer awareness.

**The Urban Wastewater Directive** [19], recast 2024, sets stricter standards for wastewater collection, treatment, and discharge. The WRS incorporates it, as with the Drinking Water Directive, for consumer transparency and to control water pollution from urban runoff. The Directive also establishes an extended producer responsibility for producers of products that generate micropollutants, which the WRS carries forward as part of its use of the polluter pays principle.

Improved water-smart spatial planning will be promoted, supported by enhanced visualisation tools to help Member States identify suitable locations for water-intensive activities. Finally, stronger cross-border cooperation will be encouraged across Europe's 75 shared river basins, building on the collaborative mechanisms established under the *Water Framework Directive*.

### **Enabling Area 2: Finance, investments and infrastructure to achieve a stable supply**

Europe faces an annual investment gap of approximately 23 billion euros to fully implement existing water legislation. To address this, the Commission has proposed a package of measures to incentivise Member States to invest in water resilience, including up to 100 percent EU financing and 30 percent pre-financing for projects. Technical assistance will be provided to build capacity in Member States that face challenges in implementing water resilience investments, alongside the development of guidance for "plug and play" water efficiency projects that require less complex planning, such as

digital tools and smart metering. Further investment in water resilience is expected to be mobilised under the next Multiannual Financial Framework. To support ecosystem restoration and sustainable infrastructure, the Commission will promote the *Green and Blue Corridors initiative*, encouraging cooperation between Member States to restore rivers, wetlands, and coastal areas.

Additional funding will come from the European Investment Bank, which has committed €15 billion for water projects in 2025–2027, and a new *Sustainable Water Advisory Facility* will be proposed to assist with the project pipeline. Recognising the need for greater private sector involvement, a *Roadmap for Nature Credits* will be adopted to reward ecosystem service schemes, and a *Water Resilience Investment Accelerator* will implement 20 pilot projects demonstrating natural water retention and water efficiency measures.

### **Enabling Area 3: Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence to accelerate and simplify sound water management**

To strengthen knowledge and innovation in water management, the Commission will adopt an *Action Plan on Digital Solutions for the Water Sector*, including the development of national water data portals to overcome fragmentation and improve data accessibility. A dedicated *Water Thematic Hub* will also be established to provide Earth Observation products supporting integrated water management. In parallel, the Commission is developing advanced digital models to assess long-term water conditions and availability, which will be made available to public administrations by 2030.

### **Enabling Area 4: Research and innovation, water industry and skills to strengthen competitiveness**

To accelerate innovation, the Commission will establish a structured science/policy interface mechanism to facilitate the deployment of existing innovative water solutions. A *Water Resilience Research and Innovation Strategy* will be adopted by the end of 2026 to address the fragmentation of current R&I initiatives, complemented by the launch of a *Water Smart Industrial Alliance* to improve collaboration and technological uptake across sectors. Public procurement will be leveraged to amplify water-resilient technologies and simplify market access for SMEs. To address existing skills gaps, particularly in technical fields such as water treatment and management, the Commission will establish a *European Water Academy*. In addition, a *Knowledge and Innovation Community (KIC) for Water, Marine and Maritime Sectors and*

*Ecosystems* under the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) will be launched in 2026.

### **Enabling Area 5: Security and preparedness to boost collective resilience**

The strategy emphasises the need to strengthen preparedness for key water-related risks, including climate-driven threats, biodiversity loss, malicious attacks targeting critical water infrastructure, and accidental pollution of inland and marine waters. To improve citizen preparedness, more detailed risk information on floods and droughts is needed. The Commission will improve existing tools for early warning, monitoring, and disaster response, and reinforce the European Drought Observatory and the European Flood Awareness System. In parallel, better security planning and a deeper understanding of vulnerabilities will be promoted to protect water facilities from both physical and cyber threats, supported by the implementation of the *Critical Entities Resilience Directive*.

### **Global Action**

At the global level, the EU will strengthen its international engagement on water resilience through the Global Gateway. It will also continue to support global water governance via the UN Water Conferences and the extension of the UN Water Convention, and work to deepen regional partnerships on water. Finally, the EU will increase development aid for water infrastructure and Nature-based Solutions.



### 1.3 The reception of the strategy

**Comprehensive, but weak**

The introduction of the strategy marks an overdue recognition of the central role of water policy for Europe's ecosystems, economy, and society. For the first time, water is framed as a cross-cutting policy issue, integrated into a variety of sectors and policy areas, correcting a long-standing siloing of water issues. To this end, the Commission has identified opportunities to integrate water quality and quantity management into industrial and agricultural initiatives, and to correct weaknesses in coherence and implementation of existing policy governing water. It can be criticised as 'repackaging', but reusing and improving fit-for-purpose existing legislation saves time and money and reduces redundancy.

Nonetheless, an opportunity was missed to increase the ambition of the legislation with stronger binding obligations.

The use of an integrated "from source to sea" approach suggests an attempt to manage water holistically across ecosystems and policy domains, guided by the water cycle rather than arbitrary administrative divisions. The Commission's endorsement of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) over the resource-intensive grey infrastructure preferred by the European Parliament marks a promising shift, resisting the political temptation to invest heavily in high-profile mega-projects in favour of more politically difficult but longer-sighted small-scale demand management

schemes. Reference to techno-fixes such as seawater desalination is surprisingly nuanced, with clear acknowledgement of the environmental and economic drawbacks and emphasis on prioritising the curbing of demand. These choices are the result of placing the '*Water Efficiency First*' principle at the centre of the strategy, and by extension of EU water policy. Prioritising sustainable use before expanding supply is proactive and systemic but politically challenging, and it is unclear how the principle will translate into action on the national level.

In line with the overall theme of the 2024-2029 Commission mandate, the strategy also correctly identifies the importance of strong water policy for EU competitiveness. Boosting domestic industries such as battery and semiconductor production will be impossible without secure water supplies, so a competitive economy must be a water-smart economy. The strategy acknowledges the significant funding gap that has limited the implementation of water legislation thus far, in part due to barriers to private investment such as fragmented markets, limited data, and unclear returns. In response, the Commission has established a Water Resilience Investment Accelerator, a concrete attempt to attract and direct funding towards water-related projects and a step towards better exploiting the potential of the private sector, but it is unlikely to succeed without clear, stable public funding.

Despite its ambitions, the strategy's implementation mechanisms are weak. Its goals are largely voluntary, with primary responsibility shifted to Member States, which risks perpetuating uneven progress and lax enforcement. The absence of

binding water efficiency targets or a clear roadmap, and reliance on soft tools such as guidance, dialogue, and voluntary cooperation repeats the mistakes of the past 25 years of under-implemented water directives, with no ways to enforce implementation or penalise non-compliance.

The strategy also falls short in addressing fundamental issues of equity and consumption. The focus on efficiency is promising but the rebound effect—where efficiency gains are offset by increased consumption—is overlooked. Reference is made to demand management but not the changing of consumption models. There is limited attention to fair and equitable access to water, nor clear criteria for how to prioritise competing uses. Moreover, it is left to the discretion of Member States to acknowledge territorial variations in water supplies, with no restrictions on industries with high water demand establishing operations in already water-stressed regions.

Financially, the flagship 15 billion euros of funding for the strategy from the European Investment Bank largely repackages existing resources, leaving a funding gap of 23 billion euros per year. A dedicated, protected budget is urgently needed for low-return but essential water resilience investments required to achieve the objectives of the strategy. The polluter-pays principle is promoted to prevent pollution and fund clean-up, but no enforcement measures or accountability mechanisms are specified. This weakness is mirrored in the approach to PFAS and other pollutants, as voluntary public-private partnerships are unlikely to ensure systematic mitigation and liability for water pollution and environmental damage.

Finally, the agricultural sector — the EU’s largest abstractor and polluter of freshwater — receives insufficient attention. The strategy relies on voluntary engagement with the Common Agricultural Policy and soft guidance on water-smart farming, promoting

techno-fixes such as precision irrigation rather than sustainable, water-efficient farming practices. The 2028-2034 CAP will shift towards an incentive basis, paying farmers who implement sustainable water practices, which risks maintaining the status quo.

**Sectoral reactions**

Sectoral responses to the Water Resilience Strategy have so far been fairly limited. The opinions below have been compiled from interviews with sector representatives, communiqués published online, and discussions at the Water Resilience Forum in December 2025.

<p><i>Agriculture</i></p>	<p>Farm Europe, a network of European farmer's associations, criticises the Commission's reticence with regards to water storage, arguing that large-scale water storage infrastructure is essential for farmers [20]. It also expresses concerns about the water efficiency first principle, maintaining that the agricultural sector has limited room to cut use. Farm Europe also calls for dedicated funding for water infrastructure and farm-level resilience adaptation, and financial incentives for water-smart practices.</p>
<p><i>Industry</i></p>	<p>The tone among industrial actors at the Water Resilience Forum was critical. A representative of the chemicals industry was particularly emphatic about the lack of coherence between the WRS and the Industrial Emissions Directive, arguing that they do not work together in practice and will impose an additional administrative burden on companies. Nonetheless, a representative of a hydrogen development company maintained that more regulation is needed to prevent firms from hoarding historic water rights and to make wastewater reuse easier and cheaper. It was emphasised heavily that industry needs clear limits, key performance indicators, and above all incentives to adopt water circularity solutions.</p>
<p><i>NGOs</i></p>	<p>The Living Rivers coalition welcome the strategy's support for nature-based solutions, pollution reduction targets, and a "source-to-sea" approach addressing plastics and chemicals [28]. It also notes positively the emphasis on ocean health integration, but criticises the strategy as "not flowing, not funded," faulting it for lacking concrete funding mechanisms and binding commitments, with too much reliance on technofixes over nature restoration. The coalition criticises "sinking ambitions" on pesticides, arguing the strategy weakens pollution controls and fails to address agricultural runoff.</p>

<i>Municipalities</i>	<p>The EU Commission has designated local and regional authorities as critical actors for water resilience, but practical barriers remain [22]. The Committee of the Regions notes limited administrative capacity, insufficient local funding, and complex governance structures that require coordination across ministries, sectors, and territorial levels. It stresses that implementation should take precedence over revising the Water Framework Directive, which they consider fit for purpose but unevenly applied due to weak cooperation and funding gaps. Concerns also persist over the merging of cohesion, climate, and nature protection funds under the current MFF, which may dilute access for local actors already struggling to attract private investment in water infrastructure. Cultural and communication gaps between EU, national, and local levels further complicate the rollout of flood risk and resilience planning.</p>
<i>Utilities</i>	<p>Water utilities and operators view the Water Resilience Strategy as a step in the right direction but remain cautious about its practical impact [1]. Meeting the EU's 10 percent water efficiency target by 2030 will require major investments in leakage reduction, infrastructure modernisation, and digitalisation. Public funding under the WRS is welcomed, but it is widely considered insufficient to close the investment gap, as long as water infrastructure remains unattractive to private investment. They also identify fragmentation between environmental and health authorities, unclear responsibilities for catchment protection, and uneven implementation of existing legislation as major obstacles to the implementation of the Water Resilience Strategy on the local level.</p>
<i>Business</i>	<p>BusinessEurope warns against disproportionate administrative burdens, unclear rules, and measures that could raise compliance costs or create uncertainty for water-intensive sectors [2]. It expresses concern about the water efficiency first principle, claiming it could lead to mandatory reduction targets without clear baselines, potentially forcing unplanned cuts in water use for energy, chemicals, and manufacturing. It criticises potential overlaps with the revised Industrial Emissions Directive and Urban Wastewater Directive, warning these could create "double regulation", and claims compliance costs could exceed 10 billion euros annually for some sectors. It stresses the need for realistic, coherent implementation that respects subsidiarity and regional differences, to avoid harming businesses' competitiveness.</p>

## 2. The strategy for councils

### 2.1 Key themes for councils

The Water Resilience Strategy is a dense document with a broad scope, and many flagship actions. In this section, some key themes are compiled that may be of interest to councils for their current and future work on water and water resilience.

#### **Bridging the implementation gap**

The key issue facing European water resilience is a lack of implementation. The EU, and many observers, consider that the existing water acquis is fit for purpose, and the problem lies in implementation at the national level. An implementation gap has stalled progress on water resilience for over two decades, and although the strategy acknowledges this, it offers few concrete solutions to correct it. It is left to the voluntary discretion of national governments to improve implementation, in which councils can play a role. A major obstacle to implementation, perhaps the largest, is funding. Innovative financing and pricing instruments should be explored to close the investment gap, and the balance between public and private funding needs to be found, which raises questions of the governance of water as a common good.

Councils should also take note of national River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMPs), which the Commission plans to use as the basis for enforcement of implementation. In the strategy it notes that many of these plans are insufficient and therefore they will likely need

reviewing over the next few years as the water resilience agenda advances, with the next submission deadline coming up in 2027.

#### **Water Efficiency First**

In addition to improving water efficiency, meeting the target of ten percent improvement by 2030 will likely require the curbing of water demand, a more challenging political undertaking. Research is needed on priority investments in water distribution infrastructure to reduce leakages and adaptive management, as well as innovative finance tools to fund costly infrastructure upgrades. The deployment of digital water monitoring and smart water management requires guidance. Cross-sectoral water-use reduction will require stakeholder dialogues, and Councils that work with the public may wish to consider outreach on efficient domestic water consumption as well, for example on the culture around the value of water.

#### **Nature-based Solutions**

The Commission has somewhat turned away from hard engineering interventions in favour of green solutions such as 'sponge cities', which are increasing in recognition in recent years for their effectiveness in slowing surface runoff. To this end, the strategy includes provision for the creation of a sponge facility to scale up initiatives to improve water

retention of landscapes such as peatlands and wetlands. The potential of these landscapes remains untapped in many countries, and worse, many such areas are being drained to create agricultural land. The protection of these areas and their use to reduce flood and drought risk, as well as the application of similar water retention methods in built-up areas, could be topics of interest. Other relevant nature-based solutions mentioned in the strategy include floodplain restoration and river restoration, for which the Commission sets a target of 25,000 kilometres of free-flowing rivers by 2030.

### **Water-intensive industry**

The Commission's competitiveness agenda relies on the expansion of notoriously water-intensive high-tech industries such as semiconductors, microchips, and data centres, identified in the Water Resilience Strategy as being key to the EU's strategic autonomy. New facilities are being built notably in Germany and Ireland, both EEAC member countries. These industrial installations raise questions for water management and spatial planning, which the EU has been slow to react to. Given the interest of many EEAC member councils in questions around artificial intelligence and the environment, this could be a subject for future work.

### **PFAS**

As of January 12th 2026, drinking water must comply with PFAS limits defined in the recast Drinking Water Directive, and Member States are obligated to monitor PFAS levels in drinking water and report data to the Commission. Advice may be required on strategies for managing PFAS, especially as evidence is emerging that suggests that current EU PFAS norms are insufficient. Prevention at source,

extended producer responsibility and the remediation of orphan sites could be topics of interest.

### **Multilevel governance**

The Commission has repeatedly emphasised the important role of municipal and regional governments for European water resilience, as water quality and quantity are in most cases local issues. Much of the necessary work for the Water Resilience Strategy must be carried out at the local level, but it is mostly top-down in its approach, with little guidance for authorities on how to implement measures, nor on funding or capacity-building, though it does acknowledge a need for them. Although most of the EEAC's member councils operate nationally, addressing the municipal and regional level in their work on water is highly recommended, and local actors can also benefit directly from council work if their contexts are taken into consideration. The challenges and recommendations below were gathered from interviews with experts from the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR CCRE).

A number of structural challenges must be overcome for effective, place-based implementation of the Water Resilience Strategy. Fragmentation of competences is a significant obstacle: responsibility for water services, land-use, spatial planning, and agriculture is often split among different actors and levels, with limited communication and collaboration between them. Regulatory frameworks, both European and national, tend to take a one-size-fits-all approach, too rigid to account for regional variations in water availability. On the municipal level, many governments lack the administrative

capacity to navigate funding, assess water pressures, and identify the necessary investments. The Water Resilience Strategy seeks to address this through the creation of a European Water Academy, but guidance and capacity building are needed for bottom-up water resilience.

Information is also needed, on country- and region-specific assessments of water issues; gaps in finance and management; the impacts on water of housing, agriculture, industry, and land use. Data can be overly aggregated at the national level, not truly reflecting shortages and levels of implementation, and on the regional level it can be distorted by good progress in big cities masking problems elsewhere.

Communication between the EU, national and local levels is often indirect and fragmented, with a lack of oversight of activities, so municipal officials can struggle to understand what is expected and what support is available. Most contact between the Commission and the municipalities and regions has to pass through the national administrations: more direct lines of communication would be beneficial, and Brussels needs to tailor relevant communications to local authorities. Better communication would allow for more effective bottom-up action, notably for Flood Risk Management Plans, which would benefit from the participation of local actors.

Finally, finance remains a major challenge. Ageing water infrastructure, modernisation needs, Nature-based Solutions and digital monitoring require long-term, capital-intensive investments to build and maintain. The merging of cohesion policy and Common Agricultural

Policy with other policy areas in a single envelope in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework will likely complicate matters, as regions will have to compete with other priorities for already insufficient funding. There are also concerns about the dilution of nature protection and climate funds into the European Competitiveness Fund. On the national level, greater delegation is needed for better management of funds, with easier access for cities and regions. Small municipalities especially lose out with the current configuration, as they often lack the capacity to complete complex processes to apply for funding, and their projects are often passed over in favour of larger ones. Beyond public funding, consensus is lacking on the role private investment should play in the provision of water, a public good.

Recommendations:

1. **Framing:** water should be recognised as a territorial issue, with location-specific challenges and opportunities, for which bottom-up action should be encouraged. Any solutions for water resilience must acknowledge the variability of local conditions, and allow for adaptation to differing spatial realities and place-based actions.
2. **Integration:** water must be embedded in broader climate adaptation policy, to unlock necessary funding and give municipal and regional governments greater powers over land use, infrastructure, and services. In some European territories, water scarcity is the most urgent climate change-induced pressure, and addressing it therefore should be the foundation of climate adaptation.

3. Coherence: consistency must be established between the European, national, and local levels to prevent fragmented implementation. National governments must clearly define roles and responsibilities for water quality, quantity, and water-related risks, with formal coordination mechanisms and multi-level governance frameworks, involving all actors as early as possible in processes.
4. Flexibility: nonetheless, councils advising on national strategies relating to water resilience should encourage flexibility at different levels, to prevent the rigidity that has hampered implementation thus far and give local authorities more agency to act.
6. Communication: local policymakers, just like national ones, are in need of best practices and case studies. Local authorities would also benefit from clear translation of EU water policy to their national and regional contexts, to overcome the communication gap between Brussels and local municipalities.

### **Climate-resilient water management**

The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), a member council of the EEAC Network, has produced its own assessment of the European Water Resilience Strategy, as part of a work programme on water governance [21]. It includes the concept of 'climate-resilient water management', proposed by the WBGU to complement the EU's own 'Water Efficiency First' principle. The council establishes four criteria to guide policy actions for the implementation of the Strategy:

1. Effective and flexible: measures must be designed to be adaptable to the impacts of climate change, and should be assessed over multiple time scales.
2. Locally feasible: solutions should be locally specific in implementation and assessment, accounting for technical and economic resource availability, land use, and local actors.
3. Multifunctional: whenever possible, interventions should be multifunctional, with environmental, health, social, and economic co-benefits alongside their hydrological function.
4. Socially balanced and participatory: water management planning should be systemic, transdisciplinary, socially inclusive and participatory, to foresee and avoid any negative consequences.

Another important recommendation from the WBGU is the recognition of 'green water'—soil moisture available to plants—as an essential water source for climate adaptation, currently neglected within the EU water acquis. Green water is essential as a landscape buffer and for ecosystem preservation, and can also be linked to agricultural policy, with farmers incentivised to manage it sustainably, as the WBGU proposes. Councils should consider assessing the green water potential in their respective countries and regions, and incorporating it into advice on agriculture and water.

## 2.2 Council work on water resilience

Several of the EEAC Network's advisory councils have already started implementing the Water Resilience Strategy in their work, incorporating some of its key principles or adapting them to national or regional contexts.

### **The Dutch Council for the Environment and Infrastructure**

In their soon-to-be-published advisory report on drinking water, the Dutch Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli) includes the Water Resilience Strategy as a starting point for their proposed national drinking water strategy for The Netherlands [25]. This strategy incorporates a number of key points of significance to the Water Resilience Strategy, namely a systemic source-to-sea approach: tackling pollutants such as PFAS at the source, restoring sponge landscapes, and situating drinking water in the wider hydrological cycle. This perspective differs from the pragmatic approach often favoured by governments, focussing on drilling more wells and extending permits to resolve problems in the short-term.

Although the report primarily addresses the supply side, the Rli push demand management further than the Commission's 'Water Efficiency First' principle, supporting the Dutch government's target to reduce household consumption, and suggesting a tiered pricing system to charge a higher rate for excessive water use. The council also projects much further than the temporal scope of the Water Resilience Strategy, looking ahead to the end of the century, to account for the long lead time on such

systemic changes. Planning for such critical policy areas requires a considerable level of foresight, and any council work on water could benefit from surpassing the typical policy vision.

### **The Environment and Nature Council of Flanders**

The Environment and Nature Council of Flanders (Minaraad), together with two other councils, addressed the Water Resilience Strategy in their joint recommendation on the Flemish government's strategic drinking water plan [24]. Like the Rli, the Minaraad recommends the adoption of the WRS' 'Water Efficiency First' principle as the foundation of a single, over-arching Flemish water supply strategy that prioritises demand reduction, followed by improvements to efficiency and reuse, and only then can expanding supply be considered. The recommendation also insists that measures for drinking water be integrated into River Basin Management Plans, which sets Flanders up for better compliance with the Water Framework Directive, in addition to a more holistic hydrological governance.

The Minaraad encourages improved implementation of the EU water acquis across the board, notably by designating protected zones as stipulated in the WFD and the Drinking Water Directive, and by embedding drinking water protection in the upcoming adoption of the revised Urban Wastewater Directive in Flanders. Integrating water across policy areas is essential for water resilience, and anticipating legislative changes is an effective way to expand that integration.

## 2.3 Upcoming water resilience developments

### **The Environmental Omnibus package**

As part of its ongoing simplification agenda, the European Commission released ten omnibus legislative proposals in 2025, aiming to reduce administrative and regulatory burdens in different policy areas [6]. One of the most recent is the omnibus VIII on environmental legislation, adopted in December 2025. It seeks to cut red tape around permitting, reporting, and extended producer responsibility for circular economy, industrial emissions, and environmental assessments, to save businesses one billion euros a year.

The Commission has plans to push this environmental simplification further, notably with a structural revision of the Water Framework Directive in Q2 2026, to streamline reporting and permitting as part of its aim to expand domestic critical raw material extraction. This risks reversing the improvements in water quality, aquatic ecosystems and river restoration stipulated by the Water Resilience Strategy. For some advisory councils, mining and other raw material activity may become a critical player in their work on water.

### **Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034**

As previously alluded to, the upcoming MFF for 2028-2034 may act as a constraint to the implementation of the Water Resilience Strategy. Finance has remained a major uncertainty in the strategy, with the Commission itself identifying a 23-billion-euro annual investment gap to implement its flagship actions. Up to 2027, the Commission plans to rely on cohesion policy funds for

water resilience projects, even proposing in 2025's midterm review an increase in pre-financing to 30 percent in 2026 to encourage Member States to take up such projects. The reorganising of the MFF for 2028-2034 into a single framework of National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) with 35 percent earmarked for climate and the environment, which gives Member States more freedom, but water resilience risks being neglected in favour of other priorities [26]. For advisory councils, this could create an opportunity to elevate water resilience on national agendas, or it could pose a limitation, if the topic slips off government radars as they constitute their NRPPs.

### **Revision of the Marine Framework Directive**

The Marine Framework Directive has been slated for revision in 2026 by the Commission, as its goal of good environmental status for all EU marine waters by 2020 has not been met, with a call-for-evidence opening in December 2025. It is hoped that the revision will fix the Directive's implementation problem by simplifying rules and reducing reporting requirements, but this could come at the expense of water quality and aquatic ecosystems. The exact proposals for the revision are unknown, but topics such as balancing the needs and pressures of aquatic ecosystems and the blue economy, eutrophication and marine litter could be worth exploration by councils, as the primary barriers to good environmental status.

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# INTERVIEWS

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Some insights for this briefing came from sessions at the **Water Resilience Forum**, organised by the European Commission in collaboration with the Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR) on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 2026 in Brussels, attended by the author on the behalf of the EEAC.

