



APE welcomes the revision of the EU Drinking Water Directive but warns that the Directive may miss its target

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This Thursday, the 1st of February 2018, the European Commission has published its proposal for a revision of Directive 98/83/EC (the “Drinking Water Directive”, DWD). We welcome this proposal, which places water utilities at the centre of a more holistic approach to managing the provision of drinking water services. By introducing a general obligation to apply a risk-based approach, specific information requirements for consumers and provisions to promote the access to water for all, this proposal will help increase consumers’ trust in the quality of tap water. We nevertheless also stress that the proposal needs to take better into account the complex realities of the water sector, in terms of governance, technical limitations and social implications. Without this, the proposal may miss its target.

Integrated planning and management, covering the whole water supply chain, is a key condition to protect water resources. In this sense, the shift to a risk-based approach, often implemented through Water Safety Plans, is a welcome move. The risk-based approach requires water operators to have a detailed knowledge of the environment and local specificities in which the water is sourced. This knowledge then sets the basis for operators to tackle these risks through a series of measures, including the protection of catchment areas or new technological solutions. Nevertheless, **in order to be effective, the implementation of a risk-based approach needs to be based on a comprehensive and coherent institutional framework** including all stakeholders with an impact on the management of water resources. This could be ensured by introducing a mention to the governance provisions of the WFD and by assigning clear responsibilities to those who can put forward measures to address the risks identified.

Specifically, the requirement to monitor the occurrence of certain substances in water used for abstraction, such as microplastics and endocrine-disruptors, will create considerable technical and financial challenges, among others because of the lack of standardised methods to measure their appearance. A more cost-efficient and effective means to tackle the issue of so-called “emerging pollutants” would be through measures to protect water bodies, based on the protection at source and the polluter pays principles. Without a clear division of responsibilities encouraging such alternative measures, this new proposal will only end up in higher costs for consumers without necessarily producing better drinking water quality.



In addition, this **shift to a more holistic approach to the management and provision of drinking water can only be progressive**, as it entails a series of significant changes to the whole architecture of the water management system, and particularly of small operators. Finally, in order to ensure compliance across the board, the implementation of the risk-based approach will need to be complemented with certification/control systems carried out by Member States, something that is not clearly defined in the proposal.

Users/customers and their level of satisfaction is a central concern in the activities of public water operators. Enhanced information requirements can be a good way to increase transparency, participation and democratic control. Nevertheless, our experience shows that the challenge does not lie in providing information in itself but in contextualising it and making it meaningful for customers in order to avoid the risk of misunderstandings. Without being put in context and explained, certain data may indeed not be taken up or even produce effects that will go against the primary aim, which is creating trust in the service and the water provided.

Access to drinking water is a human right that should be respected and promoted. By requesting Member States to map access to water and promote it through equipment in public spaces, by launching specific communication campaigns and by encouraging the free provision of tap water in restaurants, canteens and other catering services, this proposal is a resolute move in the right direction. Nevertheless, the details of this article will need to be specified in order to clarify the role of all stakeholders involved, including national, regional and local authorities. A lack of clarity in the assignation of such responsibilities may indeed result in the status quo, that is, very different national, regional and local applications and governance loopholes, which will prevent the effective implementation of this right.

About APE

Aqua Publica Europea (APE) is the European Association of Public Water Operators. It unites publicly owned water and sanitation services and other stakeholders working to promote public water management at both European and international level. APE is an operator-led association that looks for efficient solutions that serve the public rather than corporate interests.