



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION  
OF PUBLIC WATER OPERATORS

# 2024 EU ELECTIONS

OUR MANIFESTO  
FOR A FAIR,  
EFFECTIVE AND  
SUSTAINABLE  
MANAGEMENT OF  
WATER RESOURCES  
IN EUROPE

OCTOBER 2023

## WHO WE ARE



Aqua  
publica  
europa

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION  
OF PUBLIC WATER OPERATORS

**Aqua Publica Europea (APE)** is the European association of public water operators. Our members provide water and sanitation services to over 80 million citizens. APE is an operator-led association that looks for efficient solutions that serve public interests rather than corporate ones.

## WHAT WE CALL FOR

Water is a common good and a finite resource. It needs to be managed responsibly to ensure that everyone receives a fair share and to secure its conservation for the benefit of future generations. Existing EU water legislation already establishes a robust framework for managing and protecting water resources. This framework has also served as a reference for many countries worldwide. However, there are still some regulatory shortfalls and inconsistencies that need to be addressed to guarantee that water resource management in Europe is socially equitable, economically efficient, and environmentally sustainable.

To achieve this objective, Aqua Publica Europea calls upon future EU policymakers to implement the following policy recommendations:

- 1 Strengthening our resilience towards water scarcity through a common action framework**
- 2 Developing a new financing model for the water sector to reconcile affordability and financial sustainability**
- 3 Completing the regulatory framework needed to achieve circularity**
- 4 Closing the water-energy-pollution nexus**
- 5 Promoting capacity development in the water sector through global not-for-profit partnerships**



# 1 Strengthening our resilience towards water scarcity through a common action framework

Droughts and water scarcity are becoming increasingly common in Europe, affecting 30% of Europeans every year. This issue is expected to worsen due to climate change with more frequent and longer droughts. At the same time, the intensity of heavy rainfall episodes and the number of devastating floods are expected to rise. Europe must, therefore, improve its management of water quantity to prevent conflicts between water users and territories, and to ensure the conditions for a sustainable growth of our economies.



[We call for a new EU action framework that:](#)

- Establishes a common approach for the prioritisation of uses in case of water scarcity, with domestic water use at the top.
- Sets clear requirements and a uniform methodology across Europe for the collection of data on water consumption by sector.
- Encourages long-term planning for water quantity, which integrates climate change impact, and which takes into account expected water demand evolution in relation to demography and water-intensive sectors.
- Fosters inclusive and transparent decision-making processes for water allocation regimes at river basin scale to ensure democratic control and ownership over water resources distribution, while also defining conditions for territorial solidarity.
- Systematically promotes approaches that reduce pressures on freshwater resources in the agricultural and industrial sectors, including by facilitating the use of different qualities of water for different uses and through a systematic promotion of nature-based solutions.
- Supports sustainable and collective water management solutions in agriculture (e.g., more efficient irrigation systems, soil water retention through nature-based solutions, drought resistant crops).
- Ensures that impact assessment on water quantity is mainstreamed across other EU policies, in particular energy, raw materials and the Common Agricultural Policy.

## 2

## Developing a new financing model for the water sector to reconcile affordability and financial sustainability

In Europe, water supply and sanitation costs are mostly covered through water tariffs (70%). In many cases, these tariffs tend to increase at a lower rate than inflation, creating significant financial pressures on water operators and hampering their ability to invest for future generations. This adds up to growing investment needs deriving from increasingly stringent quality and security standards, the impact of climate change, and growing pressures to renew ageing networks. At the same time, affordability concerns are also on the rise in many regions and for vulnerable parts of the population that are not covered by public support schemes.

Whilst the application of the polluter-pays principle to the wastewater sector is under discussion as part of the ongoing revision of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, it is time to explore additional and innovative financing models beyond volumetric tariffing, which has intrinsic limitations in reconciling financial sustainability and affordability. This is becoming all the more urgent at a time when the mission of water operators is broadening to include new activities such as energy production, nature restoration and public health surveillance, all of which increase financing needs.



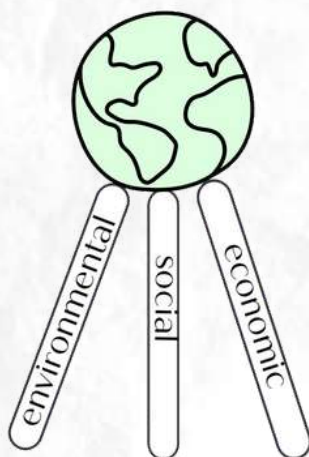
In order to reconcile financial sustainability, environmental efficiency and social equity, we call on the EU to:



Step up efforts for a thorough implementation of the polluter-pays principle across the whole water-related regulatory framework, including drinking water legislation, in line with the EU treaties and with the recommendations of the European Court of Auditors.






Launch an EU-wide, open and transparent debate on new financing models that can complement volumetric tariffing and can ensure full recovery and equitable redistribution of the costs involved in the achievement of the good status of European water bodies.



### 3 Completing the regulatory framework needed to achieve circularity

With adequate treatment, wastewater and sludge can once again become valuable resources for our societies, through reuse in agriculture and other sectors, energy production and nutrient recovery. While the full implementation of the Zero Pollution Action Plan remains a key component in this domain, a more favourable regulatory framework is also needed at European level to harness this potential for circularity and trigger the necessary investments.

 [We call for a more comprehensive regulatory framework that:](#)

-  Establishes common standards for the reuse of sludge and nutrients recovered from wastewater in the agricultural sector.
-  Promotes the creation of a stable EU market for recovered nutrients, by encouraging their use over fertilisers based on extracted minerals. The creation of a stable market is a key condition to trigger investments in the assets and technologies needed to recover nutrients, thus reducing our dependency on rare extra-EU supplies of strategic minerals.



## 4

## Closing the water-energy-pollution nexus

Not only is pollution one of the most serious threats to a sustainable management of water as it reduces the amount of available freshwater resources, but it is also a major obstacle for the achievement of the objectives set in the Paris agreement. As water treatment is highly energy and chemical intensive, improving the protection of water (both in terms of quantity and quality) is essential to safeguarding our wellbeing and our environment, as well as to prevent avoidable costs. While energy efficiency can be enhanced through new approaches, technology alone will not lead us to climate neutrality.



We call for:



A full implementation of the Zero Pollution Action Plan as a condition for achieving a toxic-free environment and reducing costs for households. This should include mainstreaming pollution prevention across all EU legislation, from water and soil to industry and agriculture.



Strengthening the rules governing the entry of polluting products onto the market, taking into account the whole life cycle of these products, including the substances resulting from their degradation (e.g. metabolites, microplastics).




Using Horizon Europe's resources to promote public investigation on products' harmfulness (including through cooperation between national public health authorities) to avoid that the provision of data on substances' toxicity relies primarily on manufacturers.

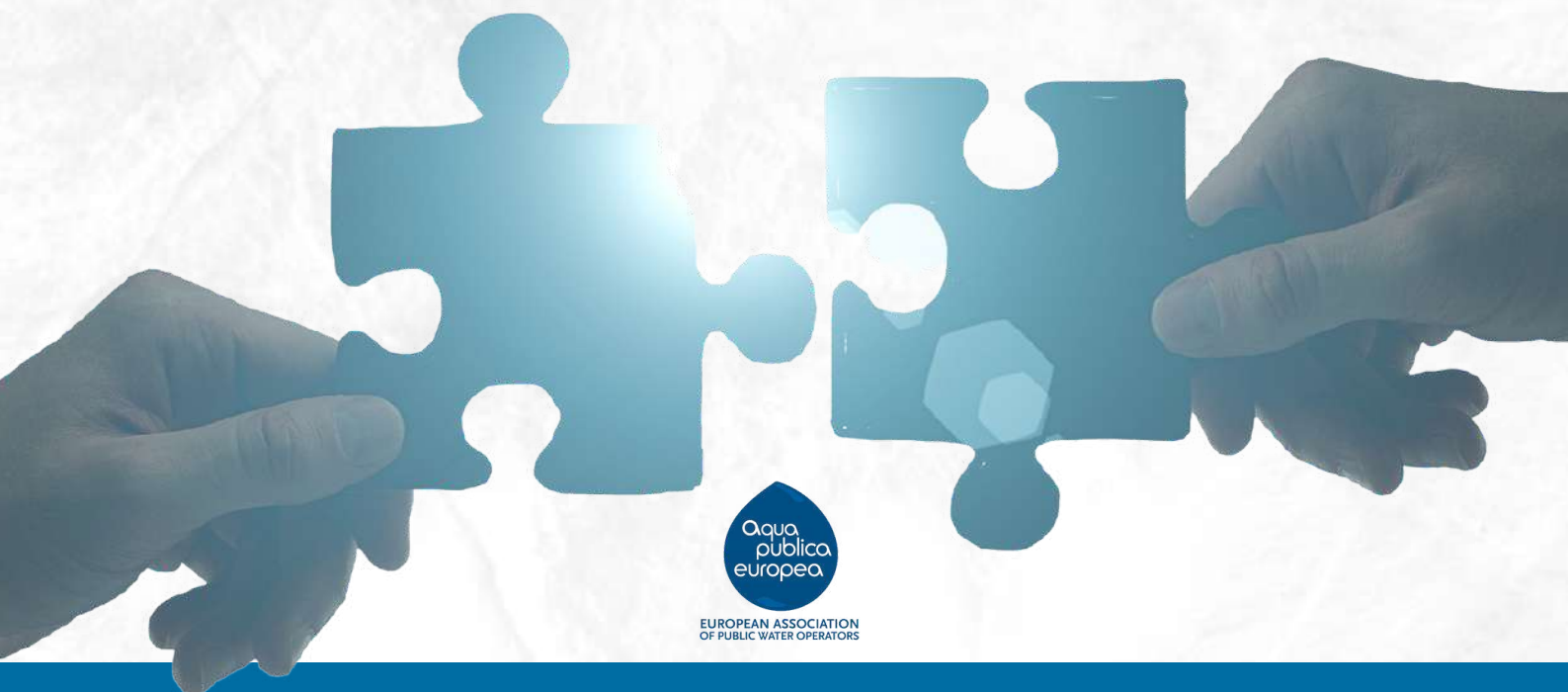


## 5 Promoting common capacity-development in the water sector through global not-for-profit partnerships

Europe has developed much needed knowledge and expertise on water resources management, both from an operational and regulatory perspective. However, we still have many things to learn from other countries and regions in the world. There is a need for a partnership-based approach where European water operators and authorities collaborate with peers around the world, beyond development aid, to find new effective strategies based on mutual learning to ensure effective management of water resources and access to safe drinking water and sanitation for all.

 [We call on the future European Commission to:](#)

-  Adopt a 'partnership-based approach' to development cooperation within the water sector, with a focus on public-public partnerships. This approach should seek to facilitate a cooperative approach to the development of solutions adapted to the local contexts of beneficiaries and maximise the opportunities for European operators and administrations to learn from other parts of the world.





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