

Open letter: Nature-based water resilience cannot wait

Brussels, 5 March 2024

Dear European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen,

We are writing to you as a group of stakeholders, united by our concern for healthy freshwater and marine ecosystems, to express our regret at the decision to delay the EU Communication on water resilience.

In the face of more intense and frequent extreme weather events related to climate change, the EU should accelerate its action to address recurrent water scarcity and protect society against the effects of droughts, floods, wildfires and sea level rise. All Europeans should be ensured of their basic right to clean and healthy water. We are convinced that achieving water resilience through nature based solutions should be a political priority under the next European Commission, with healthy freshwater and marine ecosystems - rivers, lakes, wetlands, deltas and coastal areas - at its core. We therefore call on you to launch the communication on the EU's Water Resilience Initiative before the 2024 European elections as set out in the European Commission Work programme for 2024.

Europeans are increasingly concerned about water and climate - and rightly so. We have just experienced the second warmest year ever in Europe.¹ From floods to droughts, sea level rise and wildfires, water-related phenomena and extreme weather events driven by a rapidly changing climate are becoming increasingly severe and frequent, creating major impacts on the health and safety of people, on ecosystems, and on the economy, and critically affecting cities and regions. These events and their indirect consequences tend to affect the most vulnerable groups and activities disproportionately, such as low-income groups who are often more exposed to climate risks, workers whose jobs depend on natural resources, such as farmers and fishers, or the elderly who are often harder hit by the health effects of climate change, such as heat waves.

Climate change is aggravating the pressures that human activities already inflict on water resources and freshwater ecosystems, such as land-use change and habitat loss, pollution, and over-abstraction of water. While existing EU policies and legislation, such as the EU Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, and Marine Strategy Framework Directive, as well as the EU Biodiversity Strategy are well designed to address the mismanagement of water resources and the protection and restoration of freshwater and marine ecosystems, they are poorly implemented, under-funded and barely enforced.

¹ The Copernicus Climate Change Service, [Global Climate Highlights 2023](#), 2024.

Additional EU action is urgently needed to make Europe water resilient and better protect its citizens against the predictable and devastating effects of climate change. The Initiative for Water Resilience, announced as one of your three priorities under the European Green Deal for 2024, received positive feedback from a large number of Member States² and stakeholders³, and has created expectations for a more sustainable use of water resources, including in cities and regions. **Any further delay in launching the Initiative, including its consultation and communication actions, would send a very wrong signal to citizens, farmers, industry, cities, the tourism sector and water suppliers, while also negatively impacting nature. It would signal that addressing climate resilience can wait, when climate change is already hitting hard.**

Water resilience must come from maintaining and enhancing the many services healthy and resilient ecosystems provide, such as wetlands which naturally absorb, filter and store water and provide natural buffers against floods and droughts, diverse forests which support the water cycle, deltas which maintain the balance between salty and freshwater conditions, or agricultural systems under organic and agroecological farming which protect water bodies from contaminants, reduce leaching and enhance the ability of the soil to retain water. The services provided by freshwater ecosystems alone are worth over €11 trillion in Europe - around 2.5 times the GDP of Germany⁴, while considerable health and recreational benefits such as angling, come on top. Climate adaptation solutions should not come at the cost of ecosystem degradation, and should avoid locking in water- and energy-intensive practices, without increasing inequalities in water access. This is why nature-based solutions should be prioritised over building new water reservoirs, water transfers or desalination plants. We need more nature, not less, to address the interrelated triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

We also need to move towards a more responsible and equitable use of our water resources. For decades, we have been extracting unsustainable amounts of water in many regions of the continent, as if unlimited water would be available forever. The EU needs to create a framework for transitioning towards a more sustainable use of water for all sectors and citizens, which leaves enough clean water in ecosystems and enables decision-makers and economic actors to plan the necessary investments and ensure that this transition is fair.

² Including Agriculture Ministers at the AGRIFISH Council meeting, 23 January 2023.

³ Including: AmCham Europe, Water Europe, NGOs.

⁴ https://www.wwf.eu/what_we_do/water/?11990891/WWF-Report-Water-crisis-threatens-over-11-trillion-in-economic-value-food-security-and-sustainability-in-Europe

We therefore hope that the Initiative for Water Resilience can:

- **Pave the way for making nature-based water resilience a priority in the next legislative mandate;**
- Prioritise the deployment of nature-based solutions for water resilience over infrastructure and engineering works and ensure adequate funding from public and private sources;
- Support a reduction in water demand in water-stressed areas in all sectors at a local and regional level, in order to provide long term investment certainty to European citizens and industries, and to enable the multi-stakeholder planning needed for building resilience in a just way;
- Accelerate the implementation and enforcement of the current and upcoming legislation, in particular the EU Water Framework Directive and its daughter directives; the Marine Strategy Framework Directive; the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive; and the EU Nature Restoration Law.

We remain at your disposal for further discussion.

Sincerely yours,

Aggregates Europe - UEPG

Agroecology Europe

BirdLife Europe and Central Asia

Buglife

CEEweb for Biodiversity

ClientEarth

Climate Alliance

Comité national de la conchyliculture / French Shellfish Farming Committee

EUROPARC

European Anglers Alliance

European Environmental Bureau

European Public Service Union

European Rivers Network

European Water Movement

Eurosite

Greenpeace, European Unit

ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, European Secretariat

IFOAM - Organics Europe

International Mire Conservation Group
Mammal Conservation Europe
Natural Mineral Water Europe
PAN Europe
Reptile Amphibian Conservation Europe
Societas Europaea Herpetologica
Surfrider Foundation Europe
The Nature Conservancy
Wetlands International Europe
WWF, European Policy Office



