

WEBINAR

CLEANING UP: THE REVIEW OF THE EU URBAN WASTE WATER DIRECTIVE

On 18 March the Danube Water Program held its second KnowNow webinar, presenting firsthand information on the ongoing revision of the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. The second edition covered the current revision process the EU Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive is undergoing.

Stjepan Gabric, Senior Water Supply and Sanitation Specialist at the World Bank, opened the program, remarking that the Waste Water Directive is the oldest and also, in terms of costs of compliance, among the most expensive EU Directives. For firsthand information on the ongoing modernization effort, he handed the floor to Nele Rosenstock, Policy Officer at the European Commission's Directorate General for Environment.

Ms. Rosenstock presented an overview of the Directive, its place in the EU water legislation architecture, the results of a recent comprehensive evaluation and the current impact assessment process as a basis for a successful revision.

Introduced in 1991, the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (UWWTD) is indeed the oldest among the altogether 15 Directives and Regulations that make up the European Union's water-related legislation, and one of four currently undergoing revision. It regulates the collection and treatment of waste water in agglomerations larger than 2000 population equivalents and also the related monitoring and reporting.

Considering the vast structural differences between EU countries, the results of the latest UWWTD implementation report are unsurprising: It shows wide room for improvement in many member states. Yet, a comprehensive evaluation of the Directive carried out between 2017 and 2019 proved that the UWWTD has delivered on load reduction and thereby contributed to the improvement of water quality. The evaluation also concluded that the Directive's benefits outweigh its costs by far, quite a feat considering the related infrastructure costs of around 19

billion Euros per year, and that the time for a revision and modernization is now. Its objectives are to address the existing room for improvement regarding pollution, energy use, sludge management, governance and coherence with other legislation, to align the Directive with the EU's Green Deal, and generally to ensure fitness for the future with a horizon of two to three decades.

Kicked off with the publication of a roadmap in July 2020, the revision process has now entered the impact assessment stage which involves data collection, stakeholder consultations and analytic modelling, leading to drafting in line with the EU's Better Regulation Guidelines.

Consultations of member states and stakeholders will take place in March and April, technical workshops are scheduled for May and a stakeholder conference on the preliminary findings of the impact assessment will take place in September. Furthermore, a 12 weeks open public consultation starts in April, with those who want to join the consultation invited to contact ENV-URBAN-WASTE-WATER@ec.europa.eu.

Mr. Rosenstock's fellow panelists then joined in with perspectives from their own fields of expertise. From the EurEau federation's secretariat in Brussels, Bertrand Vallet welcomed the revision process as an opportunity to implement things that contribute to the Green Deal, finding climate change-related issues and the introduction of circular economy especially important. On the other hand, Mr. Vallet addressed the large differences between countries and the necessity to apply a risk-based approach and a wide range of technology and management solutions to meet individual necessities. He also mentioned the ever-present affordability issues and the long lifecycle of assets in this field, but gave an optimistic outlook in general, convinced that good choices will be made which will pass the test of time. He said:

“You have to have transparency on how the cost of investments are recovered.”

Next, Danko Biondic of Croatian Waters reported on the state of things in the youngest member state of the EU. Improvements of Croatia's infrastructure started long before the EU membership with support from the World Bank. Yet, the implementation of the original UWWTD is lagging behind schedule, hampered by the fragmentation of the sector, the complexity of the infrastructure and limited resources, especially human resources. He commented:

“Human resources and availability are limiting factors.”

Efforts to clean up the structure of the sector and to speed up the development are under way, but Mr. Biondic notes that Croatia is not the only nation in the EU struggling to achieve compliance with the Directive.

From the Romanian Ministry for Environment, Water and Forests, Gheorghe Constantin joined in, explaining that in spite of the enormous investments involved, money is not always the main hurdle when countries in the region implement projects. Rather, countries like Romania face capacity issues, with a sizeable share of their workforce moving to other European regions to work there.

Commenting on the intention to apply the future revised directive to communities smaller than the current 2000 p.e., Mr. Constantin mentions the still widespread affordability problems,

particularly in rural areas, where many people already have a pipe in front of their homes, but cannot afford to connect without state programs to sponsor their “First Connection”.

Another compliance issue in Romania is sludge management, with plant operators wrestling with upstream pollution and refusing to be held accountable for sludge quality, agriculture refusing to use the sludge, and a circular economy a far-away dream. To resolve the situation, a revised Directive will need both a clear approach and the inbuilt flexibility to allow for individual appropriate systems. He mentioned:

“A clear approach would be most helpful.”

The subsequent discussion focused mainly on the all-important affordability issue, with Bertrand Vallet stating that at the end of the day, what is at stake is the access to water, and that therefore the price of water is very political. But whatever the model is, investments in infrastructure need to be recovered and the political will to solve cost recovery issues is all-important.

In a final round, Stjepan Gabric asked the panel what changes to the current Directive they would like to see. Here, Mr. Constantin mentioned correlation with other Directives. Mr. Biondic named the sludge management issue, the agglomeration size issue, which Croatia expects to solve by establishing service areas during a reform of the national water sector, and the necessity to establish realistic compliance deadlines.

Wrapping the webinar up, Nele Rosenstock thanked the panel for valuable insights and called for transparency in the revision process:

“When things go wrong one can always blame Brussels, but eventually it will be up to the member states come to an agreement.”

Further information, including the presentation and recording of the webinar, can be found on our [website!](#)

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