



## Urban waste water: 10th Report on Implementation

Brussels, 10 September 2020

### How is waste water treatment linked to EU's recovery?

Protecting human health and the environment as well as fighting pollution are top priorities guiding the Commission's work towards recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the urge to work on health and environment greater than ever. Strengthening the EU capacity to tackle pollution is key to improve the resilience of ecosystems and humans and help securing clean air, water, soil and food as well as safe consumer products at all times. The national recovery plans will provide a good opportunity to make better waste water collection and treatment part of the recovery to preserve public health and the environment.

### The Commission notes in its Report that the Directive is not fully implemented and that some Member States are quite behind in implementing it, the main challenges being finance and planning. How does the Commission ensure that all Member States implement the Directive completely?

The [10th report on the implementation](#) of the [Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive \(UWWTD\)](#) shows that the levels of implementation across the Member States are very different. The Commission will thus work with the relevant Member States to make the best possible use of the opportunities offered by the new EU budget and the Recovery Plan for Europe, to prioritise water treatment and sanitation. Thanks to the recent [OECD study](#) on estimating investment needs and financing capacities for water-related investment, we have a better mapping of investment gaps across our Member States. Whilst support to the Member States through EU funding will continue, it is clear that various options to enhance the liquidity of national budgets, such as an increase in water tariffs and/or the resort to extended producer responsibility to secure a better application of the polluter pays principle, will need to be considered and carefully assessed.

### In the [Report](#), you mention that you are looking into further actions on how to address the areas which need improvement. Can you provide more details?

The [Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive](#) was adopted 30 years ago to protect the environment from the adverse effects of the discharges of untreated waste water. The 2019 [REFIT Evaluation](#) found that the Directive is overall effective and efficient, but there is room for improvement. These shortcomings concern a number of 'remaining' sources of pollution, such as: storm water, overflows, urban runoff, individual systems and small settlements. In addition, there is a need to modernise the Directive to ensure that it appropriately deals with problems such as contaminants of emerging concern (e.g. pharmaceuticals and microplastics), climate change and is adjusted to latest technological progress. The impact assessment will analyse how to best address the identified shortcomings.

### What are the main EU actions to improve implementation of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive?

Among the various tools available, the most relevant ones are the following:

- **EU financial instruments** at Member States' disposal to help them improve the implementation of the Directive. Considerable funds have been allocated so far for creating collecting systems and treatment plants. For the 2014-2020 Regional Policy (ERFD and Cohesion Fund), the largest share of the planned budget (about EUR 10,6 billion) went to waste water treatment infrastructure.<sup>[1]</sup> In the next programming period, funding for waste water treatment is planned to be available under many instruments, in particular the Regional policy and Recovery and Resilience Facility. Where EU funds contribution is not sufficient to fulfil all needs in the field of sewerage infrastructure for meeting the Directive's deadlines, Member States can look for additional funding sources besides their own resources, such as e.g. Invest EU and EIB loans.
- **Exchange of good practice:** The Commission regularly meets with Member States to discuss how to better implement the Directive according to their specific needs, dealing with topics

such as governance, use of funds, planning of on-going or future investments, etc. Peer-to-peer collaboration between Member States is also facilitated by the Commission.

- **Technical assistance programmes:** Certain countries can also make use of technical assistance provided under the JASPERS programme. JASPERS' assistance may cover: project preparation support, independent quality review of projects, appraisal for major projects submitted directly to the Commission, implementation support and others.
- **Legal action:** As a final resort, infringement cases are initiated by the Commission when a Member State systematically fails to achieve compliance.

### **The Report says that the improved implementation of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive supports reaching the objectives of the Water Framework Directive. How do you check this?**

The improved implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD), thanks to the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, can be demonstrated through monitoring different parameters over time in rivers, lakes and other water bodies. One of such parameters is Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD), which is directly related with oxygen depletion and eutrophication. The Report shows how much organic matter from treated waste water (measured in BOD) was discharged to rivers in the nineties, how much is discharged today and how much would be discharged if the Directive was fully implemented. There is a clear reduction of BOD and this indicates improved quality of the EU waters over the last two decades. Such improvement is also conducive to improved aquatic biodiversity, in line with the Water Framework Directive's requirements and the new Biodiversity Strategy.

### **Increased treatment requirements under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive will lead to more heavily polluted sludge. Some Member States already started to ban the reuse of sludge in agriculture. What does the Commission plan to do to deal with this problem and to align the Directive with circular economy principles?**

The Commission is aware of the problems related to sludge and, in line with the Zero Pollution ambition and as announced in the Circular Economy Action Plan, will develop an Integrated Nutrient Management Plan to ensure more sustainable application of nutrients and stimulate the markets for recovered nutrients. To understand the environmental and health consequences of the reuse of sludge in agriculture the Commission is carrying out a REFIT Evaluation of the Sewage Sludge Directive in parallel to the impact assessment on the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. The objective being to assess how the possible revision of both Directives could enhance the safe use of sewage sludge in agriculture, thereby contributing also to the implementation of the Farm to Fork Strategy.

### **Is waste water surveillance useful to help monitor the spread of COVID-19?**

With the early beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, wastewater has been investigated as a mirror of the virus' presence in the population in and outside the EU.

Investigations have shown that the virus appears within hours in human stool in case of an infection, independently of the patient showing no, mild or strong symptoms of COVID 19. Consequently, the presence of the virus was detected in few wastewater treatment facilities before the virus was spread in the population and before the first medical symptoms appeared.

Findings have demonstrated that sewers and their surveillance are an ideal, cheap and reliable tool to complete the picture obtained by swab testing, blood test, and tracing apps.

The July 2020 *Communication from the Commission with regards to Short-term EU health preparedness for COVID-19 outbreaks*<sup>[2]</sup> identified waste water surveillance as an action area for public health surveillance.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the European Commission through its Science Service, the Joint Research Centre has launched an initiative to jointly assess wastewater samples and collect data from Member States, to make additional standardised sampling and analysis, to disseminate first results and to favour exchange of information and best practices.

### **For more information**

[IP/20/1563](#)

[1] European Structural and Investment Funds <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/EU-Level/ESIF-Categorisation-Intervention-Fields-with-filte/8m22-gy44>

[2] [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication\\_-\\_short-term\\_eu\\_health\\_preparedness.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication_-_short-term_eu_health_preparedness.pdf)

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