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Water pollution: Council and Parliament reach provisional deal to update priority substances in surface and ground waters

This press release was updated on 9 October to add the text of the provisional agreement

Today, the Council presidency and the European Parliament's representatives reached a **provisional political agreement** on a proposed directive to review and update the lists of **pollutants affecting surface waters and groundwater** and corresponding regulatory standards. This agreement updates environmental quality standards for a number of pollutants and adds new ones, aligning EU water policy with the latest scientific evidence.

The revision is an important step in **safeguarding water quality** in Europe. It strengthens the framework for tackling harmful chemicals, enhances monitoring, and ensures that rules remain coherent with the river basin management plans that guide water policy implementation across the EU.

This agreement ensures that Europe's water legislation keeps pace with science and emerging pollutants. It strikes a careful balance between ambition and flexibility for member states, while strengthening the protection of our rivers, lakes and groundwater. Above all, it safeguards the health of EU citizens and future generations by reducing exposure to harmful chemicals in our water.

Magnus Heunicke, Denmark's Minister for Environment and Gender Equality

Main elements of the agreement

Updated list of pollutants

The agreement introduces new substances into the priority lists, including pesticides, pharmaceuticals, bisphenols, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). **Trifluoroacetic acid (TFA)**, a breakdown product of certain PFAS, will be added to the initially proposed sum of 24 PFAS for surface water.

A **sum standard of pesticides** for surface waters is also introduced and set at 0.2 µg/l, covering substances already listed as priority substances. **Bisphenol-A** is designated as a priority hazardous substance. Certain substances no longer relevant at the EU level, such as atrazine, are deselected, while the standards for others are tightened in line with the latest scientific advice.

Monitoring and reporting

The agreement both strengthens and **streamlines monitoring and reporting obligations** for EU member states, to improve the monitoring and transparency of water quality across the EU without placing excessive administrative burdens. Member states will now be required to:

- report **biological quality data every three years**, on the health of aquatic ecosystems in surface waters
- report **chemical quality data** for both surface water and groundwater **every two years** — with the option for member states to report data **annually** on a voluntary basis.
- Report on the **overall status** of water bodies remains **every six years**, in line with the six-year cycle for river basin

management plans.

Effect-based monitoring (EMB) will be introduced for surface waters, improving the ability to detect harmful chemical mixtures. EBM is an advanced approach used to assess water quality, focusing not just on specific chemicals but on the **overall impact** of pollutants on ecosystems and organisms in the water. Instead of just measuring individual chemicals, EBM evaluates how a combination of chemicals affects the environment. In particular, a limited and targeted use of EBM will be mandatory for estrogenic substances, during a 2-year period.

To assist member states in developing new methods and monitoring the increased number of priority substances, the agreement provides for the possibility of setting up a **joint monitoring facility** at EU level. The Commission will assess options for its establishment, financing and functioning. Use of the facility would be **voluntary** and accessible to all interested member states.

Non-deterioration and exemptions

The water framework directive (WFD) already requires member states to prevent deterioration of the status of water bodies. Until now, this obligation was framed generally in the WFD and clarified over the years through Court of Justice case law. The co-legislators agreed on a definition of **deterioration** consistent with existing jurisprudence.

Two additional exemptions will be introduced: one for short-term temporary deterioration and another for cases where pollution is relocated without increasing overall loads. Safeguards, particularly in relation to drinking water, will apply.

Compliance and timelines

Member States will have **until 2039** to achieve **compliance with the new standards** both for surface water and groundwater, with an additional and strictly conditioned extension possible until 2045. In the case of substances with revised and more stringent environmental quality standards in surface water, the deadline for compliance is 2033.

The **20-year deadline** for phasing out **priority hazardous substances** is kept, ensuring progressive elimination of the most dangerous pollutants.

Next steps

The provisional agreement will now be endorsed by the Council and the Parliament, before being formally adopted and entering into force. Member states will have to transpose the directive into national law by **21 December 2027**.

Background

According to data from the River Basin Management plans, a key tool of the water framework directive (WFD), 46% of surface waters and 24% of groundwater in the EU fail to achieve good chemical status, with extreme differences among member states. The 2019 WFD fitness check highlighted the need to update the list of polluting substances of concern (including pesticides, fertilisers and chemicals) to compensate the shortcomings of the current list, which omits some emerging substances and focuses on individual substances disregarding cumulative or combined effects of mixtures. The fitness check also identified implementation deficits which translate into incomparable data between MSs and poor data management and reporting.

The proposed directive will amend the water framework directive, the groundwater directive and the directive on environmental quality standards, and will contribute to the EU's zero pollution ambition of having an environment free of harmful pollution by 2050.

- [Provisional agreement on amending water framework directive, groundwater directive and directive on environmental quality standards](#)
- [Surface water and groundwater: Council agrees negotiating mandate to update list of pollutants \(press release, 19 June 2024\)](#)
- [Water \(background information\)](#)
- [Pollution \(background information\)](#)

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