

Revision of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive: Just wasted water or a sustainable resource?



Thursday 9th March 2023, 13:45 – 15:30 CET

Hosted by MEP Christophe Hansen

Speakers:

- **MEP Christophe Hansen**
- **Silvia Bartolini**, Head of C2 Unit on “Marine Environment and Clean Water Services”, DG ENV, European Commission
- **MEP Nils Torvalds**
- **Professor Andrea Guerrini**, President, WAREG
- **Sara Johansson**, Senior Policy Officer for Water Pollution Prevention, EEB
- **Åsa Ågren Wikström**, Member of Västerbotten County Council & Rapporteur on the opinion on the Revision of the UWWTD, Committee of the Regions (CoR)
- **Michaël Bentvelsen**, Co-Chair of the Wastewater Committee, EurEau
- **MEP Marek Paweł Balt**



Opening Remarks

MEP Christophe Hansen

“More action is needed around water to meet the Sustainable Development Goals”

As an opening statement, **MEP Christophe Hansen** recalled the action taken about the issue of clean drinking water, underlining that **more action is needed to meet the SDGs**. Indeed, in the framework of climate neutrality for 2050, the revision of this Directive is fundamental.

Presentation of the Proposal

A revised Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) by Silvia Bartolini, Head of C2 Unit on “Marine Environment and Clean Water Services”, DG ENV, European Commission

“A 30-year-old Directive is not in line anymore with other new pieces of legislation relative to water management”

Ms Bartolini started her intervention by mentioning the success of the current directive in preventing water stream pollution. 98% of wastewater is currently collected and 92% is treated. The success of the Directive is due to **effective monitoring** and **stable funding**. The necessity for a revision is linked to an evaluation made in 2019, which shows incoherence with other pieces of legislation. There are also new elements of pollution which the previous Directive does not tackle. Improvements will concern **water quality**, **better contributions to the Green Deal** and **better Governance**; an integrated approach to **rainwater collection**, **nutrient removal**, **water reuse**



promotion and **treatment of micropollutants** will align the Directive to the current necessities, as well as the goals of **energy neutrality** of the sector by 2040 and extended producer responsibility (EPR). All this while aiming to reach the goals of **SDG 6**.

In this proposal, the **benefits outweigh the costs**; a third stream of financing will be added, linked to increased producer responsibility. Since the discussion around the revision started, the Directive was discussed at the technical level by experts from all Member States. The key takeaways of this discussion revolve around 3 points: **timelines** have to consider the necessities for assessment and implementation, new **nitrogen standards** and their adaptability were discussed, and how to achieve **energy neutrality** and how to assess producer responsibility.

Intervention by MEP Nils Torvalds, EP Rapporteur for the UWWTD recast

“If we are going to build efficient institutions for cleaning wastewater, we need to accept that we can’t do it slapping our fingers”

MEP Nils Torvalds, the rapporteur for the revision of the Directive, **reminded** the role of external actors in the revision of the Directive, especially for what concerns **energy neutrality**. Regarding producer responsibility, the issue is to find a balance between the various **levels of responsibility**. Indeed, personal and societal responsibility are to be distinguished. The implications of nitrogen removal are different when considering northern countries. **Access to justice** must be granted to providers who don’t comply with the Directive. The cost-benefit element implies considering a monetized income: there is a calculation which underlines figures that should be saved after the application of the Directive. Timelines have to be sufficiently **flexible** to allow the building of efficient institutions.

Panel discussion



Speakers that took part in the panel discussion:

- **Professor Andrea Guerrini**, President, WAREG
- **Sara Johansson**, Senior Policy Officer for Water Pollution Prevention, EEB
- **Åsa Ågren Wikström**, Member of Västerbotten County Council & Rapporteur on the opinion on the Revision of the UWWTD, Committee of the Regions (CoR)
- **Michaël Bentvelsen**, Co-Chair of the Wastewater Committee, EurEau

The panel discussion started with the intervention of **Professor Andrea Guerrini** who stated that WAREG supports the revision of the Directive. There are concerns, however, regarding cost recovery for smaller companies and monitoring information. The suggestion is to adopt a **risk-based approach**; explicit reference to the economic regulation and its tools should also be made, with WAREG playing a role in this sense. Regulators might contribute to achieving the energy **neutrality goal** by splitting the issue at the utility level, as well as boosting **innovation**. **Protecting consumers** from extra costs is a priority. Moreover, monitoring and transparency up to the citizen's level is also fundamental.

Ms Johansson underlined 3 main challenges for urban wastewater management: **climate change, pollution** and the current **cost of living crisis**. Adaptation to climate change can be an opportunity for innovation but has to be tackled properly not to risk significant costs. The monitoring requirements are linked too much to a substance-by-substance approach; **working with other legislations** is, therefore, necessary, as well as coordinating the work with other directives and regulations. There is a **cost-of-living crisis** which is concerning water bills as well, and **energy savings** will be necessary to ensure consumer protection.

Ms Wikström reminded the importance of adapting the Directive to the current challenges, first and foremost to the **micro-pollution** coming from pharmaceuticals. The **geographical features** of each EU country are different and this must be considered: enough **flexibility** is necessary in order to avoid costs exceeding benefits. Extended Producers Responsibility, she also remarks,



can lead to further investments, but regulatory loopholes must be looked for in order to avoid leaking.

Mr Bentvelsen underlined the need for the new Directive to be linked with the Water Framework Directive. **Structured and guaranteed funding**, considering the underestimated economic impact of the revision, is fundamental. **Extended Producer Responsibility** is as well necessary, as in other environmental sectors. He further highlighted the need for a **strong guided risk-based approach** to steer the prioritisation of investment both for bigger and smaller plants.

Reactions by MEPs

MEP Marek Paweł Balt

“We must look for financial solutions at the EU level that leave no one behind”

MEP Marek Paweł Balt made three key statements. He first discussed how important **clean waters** are to supplying drinking water. Second, this new Directive must be **effective and realistic**. It is essential to look for solutions for microplastics and micropollutants and look for financial solutions at the EU level to leave no one behind. Lastly, he addressed that **importers** should obey the same rules as EU companies.

Q&A session

Mr Guerrini was asked if the proposed provisions are clear enough to ensure stable financing. Investments for the proposal will be financed from tariffs, EPR schemes and public funds. The EPR scheme should be a cornerstone for the achievement of the goals of the Directive. All in all, it is essential that the EU creates more standardisation on tariff methodologies. **Ms Bartolini**



answered Mr Hansen's question about water treatment stations in small villages and the pressures the Commission should make on Member States to be more coherent and constructive. Local authorities will get support from the Commission to fulfil the targets of the Directive, although most countries already know the best solutions for its implementation.

A participant representing EurEau asked about collaborations on a regional and local level on sustainable urban waste management plans. **Ms Wikström** stated that the Directive should be flexible and involve regional and local authorities. Veolia asked **Ms Bartolini** about the EPR scheme and if it will cover the costs of wastewater treatments. She mentioned that the European Commission is aware of the impacts of the EPR scheme and will not hinder the accessibility and competitiveness of the sectors. A question was asked about Article 23 of the Directive and how financing systems will be managed in the medium and long term. **Ms Bartolini** stated that Article 23 asks Member States to draft national implementation plans and estimate investment plans so that they can adopt a long-term vision. Aqua Publica Europea asked whether reaching the indicative targets of the Directive in a short-term framework would be possible, or if long-term cost-efficient solutions would be more viable. **Ms Bartolini** stated that nature-based solutions should be emphasised and that a one size fits all approach would not be efficient. EurEau lastly asked about the energy targets and how the current proposal makes it difficult to contribute to Repower EU. **Ms Bartolini** mentioned the importance of protecting the volatility of prices, lowering the dependency on gas and sending the right signals to the market for energy efficiency technologies.

Closing remarks

In closing remarks, **MEP Christophe Hansen** underlined the need for making the Directive more applicable on the ground and to take up the challenge of energy neutrality targets, such as achieving the hydrogen standards.