



Waste no time, waste no water: The potential of water re-use in agriculture

8 October 2018 – European Parliament
Event Report



2017 was the third hottest year on the earth since measurement exists, according to World Meteorological Organization and Europe suffers from severe droughts. In this context, managing our water resources is crucial and water availability has a direct impact on our economy. Alleviating water scarcity across the EU re-using treated waste water can be a measure for a sustainable integrated water management. The European Commission adopted on 31 May 2018 a proposal for a regulation on minimum requirements for water reuse, focusing on irrigation in agriculture. The proposal aims to define the minimum quality requirements of water according to the crop grown. It also defines the steps for a proper risk assessment for the safe implementation of water reuse projects. This meeting therefore gathered policy-makers and stakeholders to discuss the proposal.

The European Commission's proposal aims to mitigate water shortages in the EU, in the context of adaptation to climate change. Furthermore, it defines the minimum water quality and monitoring requirements, alongside the process of risk management, while it ensures transparency and access to information.

Opening this conference organized under the umbrella of the European Parliament Intergroup on “Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development”, **MEP Michel Dantin** stressed that water reuse is an issue of major importance in plenty areas, especially those mainly affected by climate change. While the main objective is to extend the water cycle, "the future of water is the future of mankind", according to Mr. Dantin.

MEP Marjana Petir, AGRI opinion rapporteur on the file, highlighted the fact that water is our most valuable resource, so it is important to link the waste-water treatment processes and agriculture in the framework of the circular economy policy implementation at all levels. As "water prices should be more economic viable and sustainable for the long term", MEP Petir positioned herself against any additional obligations and costs for farmers. With reference to the Commission’s proposal, Ms. Petir underlined the need to fill the gap on water legislation. As a result, climate change and water scarcity demand to fix common standards, clear and applicable on the ground; namely minimum standards for producers and safety for consumers, including a proper risk assessment on the latter. Last but not least, welcoming comments from all stakeholders, member states and NGOs, Ms. Petir mentioned that "we can consider the large number of water reuse projects as an indicator of success".

Veronica Manfredi, DG ENV Quality of Life Director at the European Commission, highlighted that for the past two years, DG ENV was working towards the finalization of this proposal to tackle water scarcity, which addresses more and more center and eastern European countries. Therefore, Europe is looking forward to a circular water management; water shortage is a major challenge, but also an opportunity to improve waste-water reuse, as Ms. Manfredi underlined. "Today we use 1,1 billion m³ of water per year, but if the proposal will be adopted we could pass to 6 bill m³ per year". Moreover, if the proposal will be implemented water scarcity is estimated to decrease between 5-10%. While the proposal stimulates the reuse of water in particular for agricultural use in irrigation, a common engagement is requested to each Member State to protect environment. Member States also have to evaluate how and when to implement the directive, but there is "no time to waste", as the event’s title highlights. Last but not least, Ms. Manfredi mentioned that we need to elaborate common parameters and monitoring requirements to manage water safety and to protect users’ health. While the DG ENV impact assessment addresses the agriculture elements of the water reuse proposal, its key parameter is "safety first".

Representing DG Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr. **Valentin Opfermann** highlighted that adverse weather events will be more and more the norm in the future; as a result, the implementation of reuse is a key point to adapt to climate change. "We already see the effects on the agricultural sector", as Mr. Opfermann quoted, "heat waves and droughts of this summer had an impact on crop production affecting large parts of Europe, but also on pastures. This means significant pressure on the sector". As we had the lowest harvest since 2012, cereal prices have increased up to 40% in less than 5 months. Regarding the above, Mr. Opfermann reiterated the need for ambition in governance’s schemes, mentioning the so called Strategic Plans that will be at the center of the future CAP. All in all, "water reuse is an important aspect that Member States should further explore in the future and the Commission proposal on reuse is the necessary framework for this".

MEP Jan Huitema, Shadow Rapporteur on REUSE report, mentioned that Netherlands experienced extreme temperatures this summer. While it is "very interesting to look at the potential of water reuse, and circular economy", as suggested by DG ENV, "the legislation should take into consideration all citizens’ needs, and not only farmers’." Therefore, Mr. Huitema underlined the need for innovation, as well as support for pilot projects

Following the above intervention, Eureau President **Bruno Tisserand**, expressed his support for the water reuse proposal, as "safe water for reuse purposes is of extreme importance". Focusing on water reuse for agricultural use, "we have to consider that we also need specific infrastructures for irrigation"; therefore more investments. There should be additional information about water reuse objectives, from Mr. Tisserand’s point of view, alongside "a clear definition of quality standards of reused water". Moreover, a specific body should take the responsibility of risk management’s planning.

Underlining the challenges that EU has to manage and the extreme volatility of the situation, Copa-Cogeca’s Secretary General **Pekka Pesonen** mentioned that "we have to think from farmers’ prospective to understand the real situation that we have to face". As a result, "we have to improve food security, an efficient use of resources, sustainable development in accordance with the SDGs", and in order to achieve these objectives "we have to use the

opportunities offered by the waste-water reuse". In addition, Mr. Pesonen underlined the need to reinforce costumers' trust and set in place concrete risk management planning to ensure water quality. Last but not least, with reference to budgetary issues, Mr. Pesonen mentioned that the budget for farmers is already very small, so the EU should invest more in agriculture.

During his intervention, **Laurent Roy**, Director General of the French water agency Rhône Méditerranée Corse, mentioned that "there is wide support for the water reuse proposal", while the waste-water treatment plant is now an integral part of the circular economy. Mr. Roy noted that it is important to save water, which is scarce, and achieve its good status; therefore the water reuse proposal is directly linked with the Water Framework Directive. On the European Commission's water reuse proposal, Mr. Roy commented that it should progress to be motivational and ensure health safety, while a maximum range of purposes must be organized and regulated to be profitable. In addition, positive communication and transparency (clear labelling) are necessary to reassure consumers. "Reuse of water could be possible in many fields, not only for the agricultural sector", according to Mr. Roy, who also drew the attention on health and safety. As the sanitary aspect is fundamental, "we have to work on transparency and accountability", as Mr. Roy concluded.

Sergiy Moroz, Senior Policy Officer for Water and Biodiversity at the European Environmental Bureau, reiterated the need to take action. "Minimum standards and a risk management approach" could prevent negative aftermaths. While additional engagement is necessary from each member state, policymakers and key stakeholders should also provide more information to the public. "Water reuse is a tool in general water management, and all of its specific contexts should be taken into account". Underlining the need to move fast, Mr. Moroz mentioned that "the European Parliament is now debating on the issue, but there is a need to conclude the negotiations quickly". Once all tools are set in place, then we will be in a great position to act towards more efficient water reuse.

During the continued discussion with the audience, Mr. **Alfonso Alcoleathe** took the floor introducing the [Committee of the Regions' recent study on Water Reuse](#). In addition, Mr. **Sebastian Delgado**, General Director of Water in Murcia, mentioned his region's serious problem of water scarcity. With reference to the Commission's proposal, Mr. Delgado commented that "the users have to be sure about water safety, so we need to provide them with more information and awareness about the safety of reused water". Moreover, "the estimated investments are not realistic, as there are additional costs to consider, such as the one of the risk assessment", while there should be a sanitary authority responsible of the all-in-all control, according to Mr. Delgado. With reference to its entry into force, Mr. Delgado commented that "one year is not a feasible timeline, as we need more time to build or adapt infrastructures".

While there is no completely safe water for agriculture and we of course can not exclude potential hazards, "we have advanced technologies for the depuration of water, and we can furthermore manage this risk; consequently, we can use waste water in agriculture", according to **Pekka Pesonen**. From **Veronica Manfredi's** point of view, the attention is focused on agriculture, because it is the most sensitive area. However, the legislation will not prevent other options of reutilization. "Competent authorities will have to evaluate each case, namely if the situation allows the use of reused water without any risk". As a result, we need to further support innovation, in order to improve performance, reduce costs and resources. Welcoming the comments of DG ENV, Mr. **Valentin Opfermann** highlighted that water reuse has to be considered within the context of general water management.

Summing up the discussions, **MEP Michel Dantin** mentioned that before its final approval, some points still remain to be discussed with reference to the proposal. As "it is important to consider the local situations and their peculiarities", we have to pay attention to other opportunities, where water can be used too. For that reason we will also need an adapted legislation for different situations and uses, according to the MEP.

[Documents of the meeting can be found here.](#)