

Europe needs to use water more efficiently

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Europe needs to redouble efforts in using water more efficiently to avoid undermining its economy, according to a new report from the European Environment Agency (EEA). Inefficient water use impacts hard on the resources needed by ecosystems and people, both vital assets for European productivity and security.



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Agriculture, energy production, industry, public water supply and ecosystems are all important, and all competing for this limited resource. With climate change making water supply less predictable, it is extremely important that Europe uses water more efficiently for the benefit of all its users.

EEA Executive Director Jacqueline McGlade

The report 'Towards Efficient use of water resources in Europe' from the European Environment Agency (EEA) makes the case for an integrated water management, starting with better implementation of existing legislation.

"Water resources are under pressure in many parts of Europe, and it is getting worse," EEA Executive Director Jacqueline McGlade said.

"Agriculture, energy production, industry, public water supply and ecosystems are all important, and all competing for this limited resource. With climate change making water supply less predictable, it is extremely important that Europe uses water more efficiently for the benefit of all its users. Water resources should be managed as effectively as any other natural asset owned by countries."

Water shortages have severe consequences for economies reliant on agriculture and industry. Some shortages have even led to drinking water restrictions in parts of Europe. There are also indirect effects on the economy, as reduced river flows, falling lake and groundwater levels, and disappearing wetlands can have destructive effects on the natural systems underpinning economic productivity.

Increasingly, there is intense competition for water resources in some parts of Europe. Across the European Union, agriculture uses about a quarter of water diverted from the natural environment, though this can be up to 80% in southern Europe. In addition, public water supply accounts for approximately a fifth of water use across Europe – and over a quarter of this is used just to flush the toilet. Hydropower installations also change the natural structure and flow of rivers and lakes, with consequences for ecosystems.

Agriculture is one sector where easy efficiency gains are possible, because a lot of water is used inefficiently to irrigate crops. Some estimates calculate that approximately a quarter of water abstracted for irrigation in Europe could be saved, just by changing the type of pipe or channel used. Public water supply can be made more effective - as much as 50% of drinking water is lost in some EU Member States.

Inefficient use of water also leads to higher energy use, with extra financial and environmental costs, according to the report. While the energy needed to pump and treat freshwater into drinking water is typically around 0.6 kWh/m³, desalination of seawater adds approximately 4 kWh/m³. Several European countries use desalination technology, most notably Spain, which is among the highest users of desalination globally.

Authorities should set clear environmental targets for water use, within the limit of what is sustainable, according to the report. Such targets would differ depending on the available resources, but should be designed so that the natural environment has sufficient water to function. A form of

'decoupling' is needed so that increasing economic productivity does not entail increasing water use and increasing environmental impacts.

Historically, water prices in Europe have rarely reflected the true financial cost of supplying water, nor the economic costs to the environment. This has led to pollution and water scarcity, imposing costs on the environment and society. For example, the general public typically has to pay for the cost of treating drinking water contaminated by agriculture or industry. Putting the right price on water can incentivise more efficient use of water and technological innovation. Effective use of taxes, subsidies, market mechanisms, pricing schemes and other economic instruments can also help balance conflicting demands on water.

Later this year, the 'Blueprint to safeguard Europe's waters' published by the European Commission will map the way forward in this area. Throughout 2012 the EEA will release a series of reports on related water issues, exploring a variety of challenges and opportunities.

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