



Living  
Rivers  
Europe



# THE FINAL SPRINT FOR EUROPE'S RIVERS

AN NGO ANALYSIS OF 2022-2027 DRAFT  
RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT PLANS

SUMMARY REPORT - OCTOBER 2021

Working together  
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**Living Rivers Europe** is a coalition of six environmental and angling organisations: WWF’s European network, the European Anglers Alliance, European Environmental Bureau, European Rivers Network, Wetlands International Europe and The Nature Conservancy. Living Rivers Europe puts forward a strong vision of healthy river ecosystems flourishing with wildlife to the benefit of society at large, the economy and sustainable development in Europe. To make this vision a reality, and give our water ecosystems a real future, we stress the importance of an ambitious implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive and related policies. Together with our members and supporters, representing a dedicated movement of over 40 million people across Europe, we aim to ensure that the loss of aquatic wildlife is halted and reversed and that European waters are managed more sustainably.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) are required every six years under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) adopted 20 years ago, to outline how the environmental objectives for each river basin will be achieved. The 2022-2027 RBMPs are crucial, as they are the last ones before the WFD’s 2027 good water health deadline.

This report, an update of the first edition released in June 2021, includes a new analysis by NGOs of the quality and level of commitment of eight draft RBMPs in three new countries, Poland, Romania and Spain, published before August 2021, in addition to the 13 draft RBMPs included in the previous version. It draws up conclusions and recommendations that will ensure that the final sprint towards the 2027 deadline is successful. The assessment is based on a set of 47 indicators, grouped into 11 topics, chosen to reflect the objectives and components of the WFD, as well as NGO priorities in implementing the WFD. Despite the inherent limitations of this exercise, this assessment indicates how the draft plans perform in addressing the main pressures on water bodies, including restoration measures, and in using the instruments provided by the WFD.

The RBMP drafting period has fallen entirely in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic when global and EU discourses and initiatives such as the European Green Deal have committed governments to “build back better”, to prevent the upcoming biodiversity collapse, to reduce our exposure to the risks of pollution or water scarcity and to increase societal resilience. Additionally, the 2019 Fitness Check evaluation of the EU water policy indicated that slow implementation, insufficient funding, and insufficient integration of environmental objectives in sectoral policies were the key constraints in preserving and restoring water bodies, home to Europe’s most biodiverse and most threatened ecosystems. Most of the draft RBMPs studied in this report, with a few exceptions, do not address these insufficiencies.

**Although we assessed eight new draft RBMPs, this new analysis did not find more “good” RBMPs. Out of the 21 draft RBMPs assessed, only two - both from Finland - demonstrate an overall good performance.** However, even these plans contain gaps, in particular in the level of funding. Six draft RBMPs rank poorly, including the two assessed Italian plans, two assessed German plans, the Dutch Rhine plan, and the International Odra plan.

**The performance of the assessed draft RBMPs is good or high for less than a quarter of the assessed indicator values overall. Performance is poor for almost half of them.**

In general, Member States have improved inventories, tools and criteria, but the level of ambition remains low,

with numerous exemptions. In some cases, the draft RBMPs anticipate that objectives will not be achieved before 2050. One of the main constraints is the lack of budget allocation for the Programme of Measures. This is caused by the failure to recover environmental and resource costs from strong economic sectors including energy, mining, agriculture, and navigation. This reflects resistance to change from vested interests and a lack of political understanding of the importance of European waters for people and our planet.

The plans reveal a general failure of Member States to integrate water protection and the WFD’s environmental objectives for Europe’s waters with other policies, in particular energy, agriculture, and infrastructure policies. Twenty years after the adoption of the WFD, EU Member States continue to channel enormous amounts of public funds into environmentally harmful activities, which counteract and hinder the achievement of a good ecological, chemical and quantitative status for our waters. Mainstreaming sustainable water management in all EU and national policies must remain a key priority.

According to the occasionally ambiguous or incomplete information included in the assessed draft plans (except for Finland), most of the water bodies will not reach good status by 2027. Such a weak implementation of the WFD’s latest RBMPs, if not significantly improved in the final version of the plans, would be counterproductive to the ambition of the European Green Deal.

According to the WFD, the draft plans must undergo a six-month public consultation phase and be finalised by the end of 2021. During this time, we recommend that EU Member States address the shortcomings identified in the draft plans and raise their commitments to achieve significant progress towards the Water Framework Directive’s objectives. They must aim to halt freshwater biodiversity loss and put an end to Europe’s unsustainable water management.

In several countries, consultations have started only in Summer 2021, and thus will not meet the WFD obligation to adopt the plans by end-2021. It is also extremely concerning that in September 2021, at least nine Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia, some river basins in Spain, and the UK<sup>1</sup>) had not yet presented their draft plans for all river basins. We recommend that the European Commission not tolerate long delays and ask water management authorities in the relevant countries to present and commit to a strict timetable, to ensure that consultations (which should not be shortened) start as soon as possible, and that they are taken seriously by the authorities to improve the plans.

1. As the Directive was signed by the UK government prior to the UK’s split with Europe, it has been transposed in to UK law and therefore continues to apply.



# MAIN FINDINGS

Overall, the assessed draft RBMPs reveal that **commitments to achieving the WFD objectives by 2027 (20 years after the adoption of the Directive) have not increased, although there are some exceptions.** Notably, these commitments have not been ramped-up following the 2019 Fitness Check which found major gaps in implementation, lack of funding and lack of policy integration.

Two assessed draft RBMPs in Finland achieve high and good scores in several topics. This reflects efforts already made during the previous WFD RBMPs. They are followed by the draft RBMPs for the Loire-Bretagne RBD in France

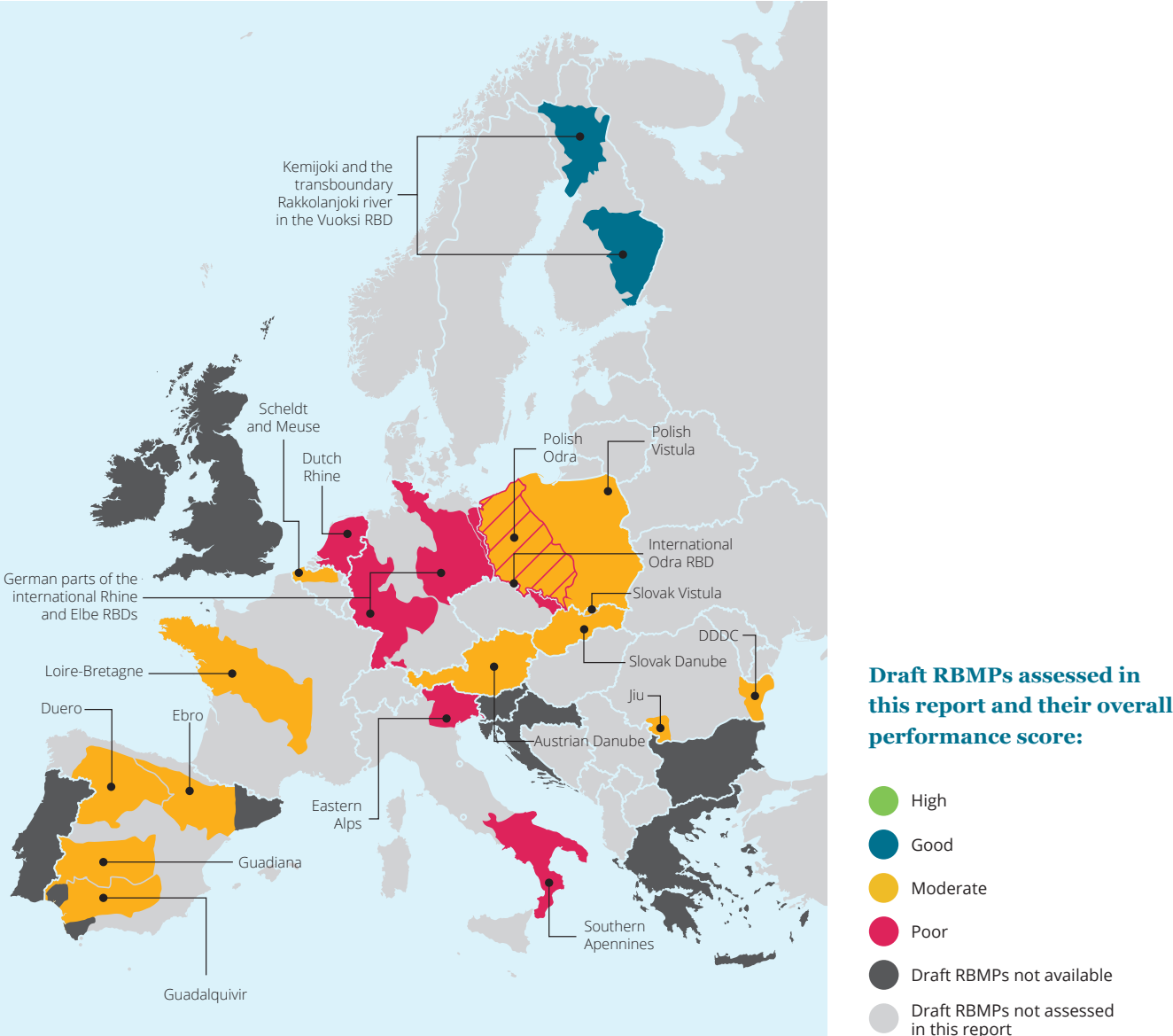
and the Guadiana in Spain which achieve a good performance in several topics and progress towards the WFD objectives. However, even these plans contain gaps, in particular regarding the level of funding, which prevent the river basin from being completely on track to achieve the WFD objectives by 2027. At the lower end of the scale, the assessed draft RBMPs for Germany, the Dutch section of the Rhine, the international Odra River Basin District, and the two Italian RBDs show multiple areas of poor performance, with information gaps, poor planning such as missing of criteria and prioritisation, and a lack of ambition for the implementation and the achievement of WFD objectives (Figure 1).

Although most of the plans do not demonstrate the significant rise in commitment that would be necessary to achieve good water status in European water bodies, some improvements were noticed across the assessed RBMPs. These improvements include the removal and adaptation of barriers in line with the targets set by the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy <sup>2</sup>, freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration, drought and flood management, and addressing pollution from agriculture, in particular nitrates. However, many assessed draft RBMPs fail to properly address water allocation and abstraction control, with poor inventories and missing details on permit reviews for water abstraction and on control mechanisms. This is particularly worrying as climate change will likely lead to greater water abstractions across the EU, exacerbated e.g. by the planned 30,000 hectares of irrigation area in the Spanish Ebro. Slovakia, the Spanish Guadiana and Guadalquivir include however some promising measures to control and reduce water use and consumption.

**From the assessment, the two largest gaps in the draft RBMPs are cost recovery and the provision of an adequate budget on the one hand, and the application of exemptions on the other hand.** Regarding the budget, several plans do not even present a gross figure for the implementation of the proposed measures. Regarding the exemptions, the majority of the draft RBMPs still heavily rely on poorly justified exemptions, despite the fact that they should be very rare after 20 years of WFD implementation. In the Spanish Ebro, 58 water bodies (6% of total) have deteriorated since the previous plan, whilst only 20% of its Programme of Measures had been executed, due to budget constraints. Deterioration has also affected 29% of the water bodies in the Polish Odra, where one third of the previous PoM has not been implemented because of lacking budget whilst cost recovery for water abstractions in agriculture is of only 2.7%. Most of the draft RBMPs do not provide a summary and explanation on shortcomings in the implementation of the previous RBMPs' Programme of Measures (Table 1).

2. In particular, the commitment to restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers through barrier removal and wetland and floodplain restoration.

Figure 1: Overview of draft 2022-2027 RBMPs in September 2021



**LITTLE HAS IMPROVED SINCE THE 2019 FITNESS CHECK WHICH FOUND MAJOR GAPS IN IMPLEMENTATION, LACK OF FUNDING AND LACK OF POLICY INTEGRATION.**

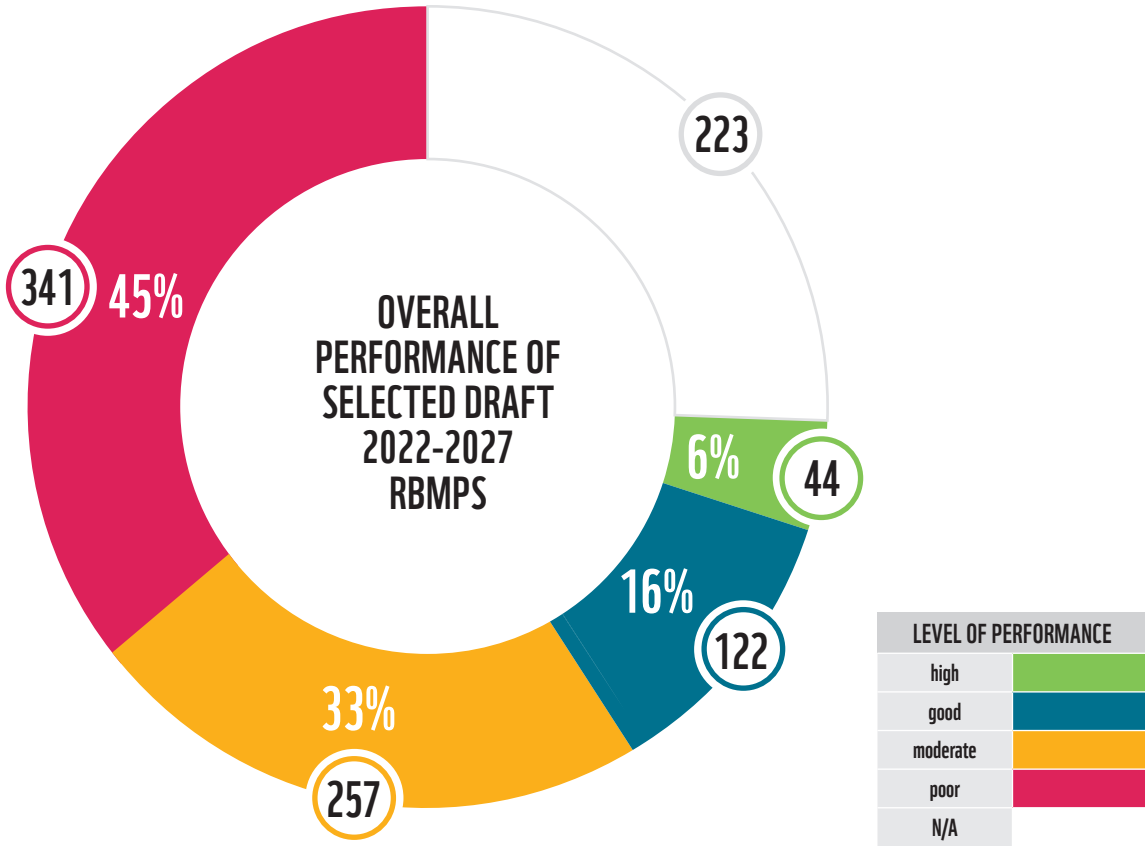
**Table 1:** Overview of the performance of selected draft RBMPs on indicators assessing key topics, weighted according to the topic’s relevance. Draft RBMPs show far too little ambition, i.e. they do not contain enough measures that will help achieve the WFD objectives by 2027. The in-depth analysis of indicators aims to provide concrete recommendations to the relevant EU Member States’ authorities and the European Commission.

|       |                                                              | NEW    |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        | NEW   |      | NEW       |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------|------|-------|-------|------|--------------|----------|----------|--------|-------|------|-----------|---------|-------|------|---------|------|-----|--------|---------|
|       |                                                              | AT     | BE                | DE   | ES    |       |      |              | FI       | FR       | INT    | IT    | NL   | PL        | RO      | SK    |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| Topic |                                                              | Danube | Scheldt and Meuse | Elbe | Rhine | Duero | Ebro | Guadalquivir | Guadiana | Kenijoki | Vuoksi | Loire | Odra | S. Apenn. | E. Alps | Rhine | Odra | Vistula | DDDC | Jiu | Danube | Vistula |
| 1     | Removal and adaptation of barriers                           |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 2     | Hydropower                                                   |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 3     | Inland navigation                                            |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 4     | Freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration and NBS      |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 5     | Water allocation and abstraction control                     |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 6a    | Drought management                                           |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 6b    | Flood management                                             |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 7     | Agriculture                                                  |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 8     | Coal mines (and combustion)                                  |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 9     | Economic instruments and adequacy of budget                  |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 10    | Exemptions                                                   |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |
| 11    | Review and update on the implementation of the previous RBMP |        |                   |      |       |       |      |              |          |          |        |       |      |           |         |       |      |         |      |     |        |         |

**Table 2:** Colours codes used in this report, showing both performance on a certain issue and that issue’s relevance to the River Basin District in question

|           |                                                                    | LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE |      |          |      |     |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------|----------|------|-----|
|           |                                                                    | high                 | good | moderate | poor | N/A |
| RELEVANCE | Not applicable or relevant for the RBD                             |                      |      |          |      |     |
|           | This problem/ challenge has already been solved in the second RBMP |                      |      |          |      |     |
|           | One of the many problems/challenges in this RBD                    |                      |      |          |      |     |
|           | One of the Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI)              |                      |      |          |      |     |
|           | The main problem/challenge in this RBD                             |                      |      |          |      |     |

**Figure 2:** Overall performance of selected draft 2022-2027 RBMPs on the 47 indicators (in number of indicator values and %).



For less than one fourth of the overall 732 assessed indicator values, the performance of the assessed draft RBMPs rates good or high: 6% ranked high, 16% good, 33% moderate and 45% poor – almost half of the assessed indicator values. The remaining indicator values have not been assessed, either because the topic is not relevant for the RBD or due to a lack of time and available expertise (Figure 2).

Almost all assessed draft RBMPs fail to properly address water allocation and abstraction control. Inventories and details on permit reviews for abstractions, and on controls are limited (although Slovakia and Spain are positive examples in this case) which is particularly worrying as climate change is likely to lead to larger water abstractions across the EU.

While carrying out this assessment, several irregularities in the RBMP elaboration process came to light.

**Firstly, the assessed draft RBMPs contain major gaps in information, in particular on the summary of the implementation of the previous RBMPs’ Programme of Measures, the number of exemptions, and the budget.** This hampers proper public participation and the ability of civil society to provide comments on the draft plans.

**Secondly, at the time of writing this report (mid-September 2021), significant delays in the publication of the draft plans were observed.** In particular, in Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia, partly Spain, and the UK, most of the draft plans were still not publicly available. These countries will not be able to submit their final plans on time – by the end of 2021 – while respecting the minimum six-month public consultation obligation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This report presents an assessment of 21 draft River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) in eleven EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) and one international River Basin District (Odra), covering 11 topics with 47 indicators.

Public consultations on many of the plans are still ongoing and by using the information included in this assessment, Member States can ensure that this is not just a “paper exercise”, but a strategic effort to secure a resource which is vital to nature and people, and yet highly endangered. The RBMPs should raise their commitments to make significant progress towards the Water Framework Directive’s objectives and halt freshwater biodiversity loss, putting an end to Europe’s unsustainable water management.

However, **20 years after the adoption of the Directive, the assessed draft RBMPs reveal that the commitments to achieving the WFD objectives by 2027 have not notably increased, with a few exceptions.** This is despite the 2019 Fitness Check’s conclusion that implementation, lack of funding and lack of policy integration were the major gaps in reaching the WFD’s goals. For only less than one-fourth of the overall assessed indicator values, the performance of the assessed draft RBMPs is good or high, while it is poor for almost half of them.

The draft RBMPs display a general failure of EU Member States to integrate water protection and the WFD’s environmental objectives for Europe’s waters into agriculture, energy and infrastructure policies. These sectors are among the main drivers of environmental degradation and aquatic biodiversity loss affecting Europe’s rivers, lakes and groundwater resources. Twenty years after the adoption of the WFD, EU Member States continue to direct enormous amounts of public funds in environmentally harmful directions. These adverse subsidies effectively counteract and prohibit the achievement of a good ecological, chemical and quantitative status of our waters.

Two of the assessed RBMPs – both in Finland – have been awarded ‘high’ or ‘good’ results in several topics. This reflects the efforts that were made during the previous WFD RBMPs.

The Finnish RBMPs are followed by the draft RBMP for French Loire-Bretagne and Spanish Guadalquivir, which have achieved ‘good’ results in several topics and progress towards WFD objectives has been made. On the lower end, the assessed draft RBMPs for the German section of the Elbe, the Dutch section of the Rhine, the international Odra River Basin District (RBD), the two Italian RBDs and the German part of the international plan for the Rhine show multiple areas of moderate and poor performance. The main failings include information gaps, poor planning, and a lack of ambition for achieving WFD objectives.

Some improvements were found in the assessed RBMPs, including measures for dam removal and the adaption of barriers (which is also in line with the targets set by the EU 2030 Biodiversity Strategy), freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration, drought and flood management and addressing diffuse pollution from agriculture, in particular nitrates.

A major gap in the draft RBMPs is cost recovery and sufficient budget; several plans do not even have a gross budget. Deterioration of water body status is significant in the Polish Odra and the Spanish Ebro. The majority of the draft RBMPs still heavily relies on poorly justified exemptions, despite the fact that they should be exceptional given that the WFD came into force 20 years ago. Most of the draft RBMPs do not provide a summary and explanation of the shortcomings in the implementation of the previous RBMPs.

Almost all assessed draft RBMPs fail to properly address water allocation and abstraction control. Inventories and details on permit reviews for abstractions, and on controls are limited (although Slovakia and Spain are positive examples in this case) which is particularly worrying as climate change is likely to lead to larger water abstractions across the EU.

River basin authorities and EU Member States are currently finalising their RBMPs for 2022-2027 as required by the Water Framework Directive but major delays are observed.

## Our recommendations to the relevant national and river basin authorities are:

- 1. Dedicate a substantial budget to the Programme of Measures.** Protecting and restoring freshwater and the ecosystems it relies on must become an investment priority, and various financial streams, including EU and national funding, must be mobilised. Prioritising investments that are beneficial to water bodies will result in more sustainable and integrated measures that not only meet water needs in different sectors, but also improve sustainability and biodiversity in the aquatic environment. Programmes of Measures should be aligned with other financial plans for supporting biodiversity such as the Prioritised Action Frameworks under the Nature Directives as well as CAP Strategic Plans and National Resilience and Recovery Plans.
- 2. Apply a cost recovery approach to all sectors** and ensure that the financial resources recovered are available for adequate water management services and for eliminating the related environmental and resource costs through all measures. Substantial measures should be taken to apply the cost recovery principle to the sectors responsible for the highest pressures on water bodies: agriculture, energy (hydropower, coal mining and combustion) and shipping.
- 3. Phase out harmful national and European subsidies** including certain agricultural subsidies, state aid to the hydropower sector and energy taxation exemptions for hydropower. Consider increasing the use of mandatory measures and binding criteria to adapt other sectors’ activities so that they contribute to water quality and biodiversity.
- 4. Limit exemptions to exceptional cases,** and ensure that the evaluation of overriding public interest is done in a transparent and science-based manner, and assessed against the public interest of preserving or restoring freshwater ecosystems and their ecological functions. Make sure all planned infrastructure projects are included in the RBMP with an assessment of their possible effect on water body status and accompanied by measures to minimise or compensate for these effects.

- 5. Align the RBMPs with national biodiversity ambitions** by using the RBMPs to plan for measures that restore free-flowing rivers (as required by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030) and by dismantling obsolete weirs, dams and other structures in the river. This should be prioritised over fish ladders which are insufficient. Improve knowledge and measures that ensure that water management contributes to proper water and sediment flows, the conservation of high-quality surface waters and the protection of groundwater-dependent ecosystems and nature protection areas.
- 6. Actively promote the uptake of nature-based solutions, natural water retention measures and nature climate buffers,** as alternatives and complements to traditional engineering solutions. Each RBMP should include a strategy for piloting and upscaling NBS projects so they become the preferential option in planning infrastructural measures.

## Our recommendations to the European Commission:

- 1. Actively encourage Member States** to make sure that the commitments made in the RBMPs are aligned with the ambition of the European Green Deal. It is crucial that the third RBMPs are aligned with the targets set by the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Zero Pollution Action Plan, and the EU Climate Adaptation Strategy, and that opportunities are fully used in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans.
- 2. Make use of enforcement powers** to ensure that more cases of non-compliance with the Water Framework Directive are open and investigated, and delays are shortened.
- 3. Do not tolerate delays** or poor public participation processes in the finalisation of the RBMPs; with special attention to those Member States which have not yet started the 6-month consultation process of the draft RBMPs, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Slovenia, some parts of Spain, and the UK.

4. **Phase-out harmful EU subsidies** to sectors and activities which counteract and prohibit the achievement of a good ecological, chemical and quantitative status of our waters through: the revision of the EU State Aid Guidelines, the CAP Strategic Plans, the National Recovery and Resiliency Plans, the revision of the Energy Taxation Directive and the EU Structural and Cohesion Fund Programmes.
5. **Mainstream the protection of freshwater ecosystems in sectoral policies** under the European Green Deal to complement and reinforce the Water Framework Directive. The upcoming EU Restoration Law should contain a legally-binding, ambitious free-flowing river restoration target.<sup>3</sup> Particular efforts are also needed to align transport (revision of the TEN-T guidelines, NAIADES III action plan), agriculture (CAP strategic plans) and energy (revision of the Renewable Energy Directive) policies with the objectives of the WFD.

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3. We recommend increasing the current target for free-flowing rivers of at least 25,000 km to 15% of all rivers to be restored to a free-flowing state by 2030 through inter alia barrier removal and floodplain restoration. See Living Rivers Europe, [Protecting and restoring river ecosystems to support biodiversity](#), March 2021.



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