



European River Symposium 2021 – Session 13

Sustainable agriculture and water management: towards new synergies

Outcomes

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CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES

Despite Europe's commitment in the legislative and organization effort to improve rivers and to reduce the negative human influences affecting them, European rivers still suffer pollution and damages. Around 40 % of surface waters (rivers, lakes and transitional and coastal waters) are in good ecological status or potential, and only 38 % are in good chemical status (European Environmental Agency, 2018. European waters: Assessment of status and pressures).

Actions by important economic actors such as agriculture, hydropower, and urban municipal waste water services, and various industrial production sectors are all key to improvements made and in future needed. European initiatives such as the Water Framework Directive and the newly released Green Deal and Biodiversity Strategy offer new hope that with the right use of legal and legislative tools together with dialogue and cooperation between sectors using and affecting rivers, their condition and health can be improved.

The 2021 European River Symposium held 26-27th May 2021, brought together a wide Partner network of key organizations in Europe dealing with rivers that both guided the content and discussions that were held at the Symposium and ensured that actions and activities will follow on from the Symposium and will influence the management and actions affecting rivers.

Session 13 of this symposium presented the current stakes and objectives of water management in agriculture, illustrated by some case studies from several stakeholders. A discussion time together with the intervention of the European Commission was also the opportunity to address how the future CAP and Green Deal could help achieving these, for a sustainable agriculture that preserves water.

Speakers:

- Ms. Stéphanie Laronde, International relations director, International Network of Basin Organizations (INBO)
- Mr. Ádám Kovács, Technical expert, International Commission for the Protection of Danube River (ICPDR)
- Ms. Julienne Roux, Senior network specialist, Global Water Partnership (GWP)
- Mr. Peter Newborne, Regional Coordinator for Europe, Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS)
- Ms. Leanne Roche, European Commission DG Environment
- Olle Häggblom. Water resources management expert at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Finland

MAIN OUTCOMES

Pressures from agriculture are currently amongst the most significant pressures identified by Member States in many river basin districts, posing potential risk of non-achievement of the environmental objectives under the WFD. These last years, climate change has arisen as a new pressure for both agriculture and water, water being a central element of adaptation to climate change in agriculture.

Some policies such as the Nitrates Directive have a key role in protecting waters against agricultural pressures, but the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is the main policy that influence agricultural practices. Despite being a strong instrument to encourage sustainable water management in agriculture, its measures are not always used sufficiently to reduce agriculture pressures.





New European strategies

In 2018, the European Commission presented proposals for a **new CAP**, aiming to increase the level of environmental ambition with two important environmental directives entering the scope of conditionality: namely the Water Framework Directive and the Directive on sustainable use of Pesticides. Member states will have to define their intervention strategy in their CAP strategic plan, which shall consider the needs identified in the RBMPs and contribute to the achievement of WFD objectives. This future CAP has a crucial role in facilitating the transition towards sustainable agriculture.

During this session of the European Rivers Symposium, the negotiations for CAP post 2020 were still being held. Among many CAP-related issues to be discussed, that of this ambition of conditionality and integration of WFD in the conditionality was raised during the session, namely how access to CAP support/subsidies may be made conditional on compliance with water and other sustainability targets.

The CAP reform is in line with the European Green Deal (EGD), which is a roadmap for making the EU's economy sustainable, **since** the CAP proposal includes tools to further promote sustainable farming practices across EU, crucial to achieve the Green Deal's ambitions. This will happen by turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities across all policy areas and making the transition fair and inclusive for all.

This **European Green Deal** brings a new impetus to transform the EU's agricultural economy for a more sustainable future, including a 'fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system' across the agricultural supply chain from 'Farm to Fork'. Under the Farm to Fork strategy, a key water target is for a 50% reduction in nutrient losses (nitrogen and phosphorous) with part of that being a reduction in fertilizer use by 20%. Member States are to adopt and apply Integrated Nutrient Management Action

Plan to improve soil quality and reduce pollution to rivers and other water bodies.

The **EU's Biodiversity strategy** for 2030 is a long-term plan to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems, and a core part of the European Green Deal. Together with the Farm to Fork Strategy published at the same time, it includes commitments to reverse the decline of pollinator insects. To support the long-term sustainability of both nature and farming, these strategies will work in tandem with the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The CAP Strategic plans should lead to sustainable practices such as precision agriculture, organic farming, agro-ecology, more efficient irrigation, low-intensive permanent grassland, stricter animal welfare standards.

These strategies will provide leadership, guidance and tools. But they also have strong expectations in terms of actions to be taken by Member States. For example, when building the new CAP, individual Member States will have a much greater say in the process, giving them the opportunity to better tailor implementation of the standards to the particular situations of their farmers.

A point of attention was then raised during the session that ambition needs to be sustained at Member State level also, as a lot of current strategies and policies rely on decision making at Member State level. And provisions should be embedded in the EU strategies and policies to ensure that Member States action is sufficiently ambitious.

Finally, the need of coherence between these strategies has been evoked.

"Key issue is to establish a proper cooperation and partnership with agriculture, so that the water management and agriculture policies can be better aligned" (Adam Kovacs, ICPDR).





What is “Water Stewardship?”

Stewardship is about taking care of something we do not own. The availability of sufficient water of good quality is a matter of shared concern, as well as individual interest. A key first step to addressing the concern is awareness and understanding of the situation relating to water (both quantity and quality) in the ‘catchment’ and river basin in which a given water user’s farm or factory is located and, where there is a water problem(s), the water user is willing, on a voluntary basis, to respond with action, not alone, but rather in collaboration with other water users - other farmers/businesses in the catchment.

In doing so, they will contribute to progress towards the goals which the mandatory legal/regulatory framework of the EU Water Framework Directive is designed to achieve.

*The **AWS Standard** is a set of principles & steps providing a robust practical guide for achieving stewardship - a ‘code’ of best practice in water management.*

Mobilizing actors

A whole of society approach is needed, relying in the involvement and collaboration of all actors: political leadership, farmers, agrifood chain actors, researchers and scientists, cross-sectoral collaboration, consumers, civil society...

River basin organizations have an important role to play in facilitating dialogue and cooperation, and ICPDR presented during the session its approach to sustainable agriculture in the Danube River Basin. Agriculture is an important sector in the basin and has major impacts on water resources, including in particular in terms of nutrient and pesticides pollution. Water scarcity is also an emerging issue. When ICPDR started working on the topic of agriculture and water, it realized that the approach was too often a confrontation between the sectors; whereas it is key to establish trust and shared ambition. This entails taking into account farm economics, looking for win win approaches,

ensuring appropriate consultation with farmers and good policy coordination. Taking such an approach, ICPDR has been working on a guidance document to decision makers, recommending policy instruments and measures, and supporting the definition and implementation of agro-environmental policies under CAP and river basin management plans (more information on ICPDR activities on agriculture [here](#)).

The mobilization of agrifood chain actors was also raised as an important issue. Water stewardship could be a very relevant tool to tackle this issue, by mobilizing the private sector actors in the agricultural supply chain through implementation of the [Alliance for Water Stewardship-AWS Standard](#) as the global standard for water stewardship (applicable to all 27 countries of the EU, and beyond).

The panelists also noted the need to engage and support farmers. One means of support to farmers is the agricultural advisory systems which Member States operate under ‘AKIS’ (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems).





A focus on green solutions

Green solutions are very key to achieve the objectives of the major European strategies and policy instruments listed above. Provisions are made for promoting such solutions in agriculture - the Commission proposes that 10% of agricultural land should consist of 'high-diversity landscape features', for instance in the form of hedges or flower strips, and the environmental impacts of the agricultural sector should be significantly reduced by 2030. Also a quarter of agricultural land should be under organic farming management by 2030, and the use and risk from pesticides should be reduced by 50%, as well as the use of the more hazardous/dangerous pesticides.

Of the 25% of the EU budget dedicated to climate action, a significant proportion will be invested in biodiversity and nature-based solutions.

The example of Natural Water Retention Measures (NWRM) was discussed during the session, as having an excellent alignment with key EU strategic goals. The need to support this type of measure via policy instruments was raised. *“There is a strong potential to upscale the NWRM [...], in Europe these are totally aligned with many different European objectives and instruments including the WFD, the Green Deal, the Biodiversity strategy, the environmental objectives of the CAP and the Farm to Fork strategy”* (Julienne Roux, GWP).

The need to support the application of NWRM in the CAP was also underlined during the session by ICPDR while presenting its future guidance document on sustainable agriculture in the Danube River Basin.

Natural Water Retention Measures

Natural Water Retention Measures (NWRM) are multi-functional measures that aim to protect and manage water resources and address water-related challenges by restoring or maintaining ecosystems as well as natural features and characteristics of water bodies using natural means and processes. Their main focus is to enhance, as well as preserve, the water retention capacity of aquifers, soil, and ecosystems with a view to improving their status. NWRM have the potential to provide multiple benefits including the reduction of risk of floods and droughts, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge and habitat improvement.

NWRM has a strong potential to upscale, since they can contribute to multiple European objectives, including WFD, Green Deal, Biodiversity strategy, and environmental objectives of the CAP and Farm to Fork strategy.

GWP and OiEau are both engaged in the H2020 OPTAIN project whose aim is to identify the most efficient and easy-to-implement techniques for the retention and reuse of water and nutrients in small agricultural catchments across three biogeographical regions.

Some references

-GWP and partners, 2020. *Practical Guidelines on planning Natural and Small Water Retention Measures in River Basins*. Editors: Sabina Bokal (Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe); Tomasz Okruszko (Warsaw University of Life Sciences) <https://www.gwp.org/en/GWP-CEE/WE-ACT/news/2020/practical-guidelines-on-planning-small-water-retention-in-river-basins/>

-NWRM website. <http://nwrn.eu/>



MAIN MESSAGES

-New European strategies (European Green Deal, new CAP) offer opportunities towards more environmental ambition. They rely a lot on decision making at Member States level, so the ambition must be sustained at Member States level too.

-One of the main important elements to reach a sustainable agriculture preserving water is the cooperation between stakeholders of water and agriculture sectors, having a shared ambition. River basin organizations have an important role to play in this dialogue. Water stewardship is also a relevant tool to tackle this issue, to mobilize agricultural actors.

-NWRM are a great way to address multiple challenges. Knowledge, capacity building, awareness are fundamental to upscaling these measures.



Figure 1: Natural Water Retention Measure. @ GWP CEE