

# **INFORMAL COUNCIL OF ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS**

## **WATER SCARCITY AND DROUGHT (WS&D)**

This document supplements the EC Communication of July 18<sup>th</sup> as the basis for the Informal Council of Environment Ministers, which will take place in Lisbon from 31 August to 1 September 2007.

Water scarcity and drought are events that presently affect a significant number of EU residents and which cannot be addressed only through actions undertaken by each Member State on its own. Rather, they imply the discussion about a European strategy, including consideration of adequate institutional, technical and financial instruments at European level. Climate change scenarios further raise concerns and demonstrate the need to take measures to adapt to current and future climate change, as underscored by the recently adopted Green Paper.

The discussions at the Informal Council will aim, namely, to:

- recognize the relevance of WS&D and its impacts at European level;
- discuss the set of proposed options in the EC Communication;
- analyse the current situation, which is aggravated due to climate change;
- envisage the creation of adequate EU indicators in order to reflect scarcity and drought situations:
- envisage a European Strategy and adequate institutional, technical and financial instruments to deal with WS&D;
- analyse the need for future legislative action on droughts.

**ADRESSING THE CHALLENGE OF WATER SCARCITY AND DROUGHTS**  
**PROPOSED BACKGROUND TEXT FOR THE INFORMAL COUNCIL**

1. Over recent decades, a significant number of European Countries have been subject to water scarcity and drought events. These phenomena are not new but they have been increasing in intensity and extent at European level, with worsening socio-economic and environmental impacts. Therefore, at the Environment Council on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2006, some Member States requested European action on water scarcity and drought;
2. The full implementation of the Water Framework Directive (hereinafter WFD), the EU's flagship directive on water policy, is a major priority. The WFD establishes a framework of great value, innovation and scope for water management in Europe, establishing the tools for achieving the good status of all European waters, while encompassing a flexible approach to addressing environmental objectives;
3. Some concerns and gaps relating to quantitative issues, which influence the achievement of the environmental objectives, were identified during the on-going implementation of the WFD, particularly in regard to floods, water scarcity and droughts. Within the Common Implementation Strategy (CIS) of the WFD, the Commission has conducted an in-depth analysis and diagnosis (Second Interim Report, June 2007) of Water Scarcity and Droughts in the EU (hereinafter WS&D);
4. This assessment shows that drought affected all EU countries in different ways. According to the replies received so far from several Member States, severe events were identified that on an annual basis have affected more than 800 000 km<sup>2</sup> of the EU's territory (37%) and at least 100 million inhabitants (20%) in recent years with different degrees of intensity. Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom all provided specific data, but other European countries have also been severely affected by drought (e.g. Slovenia, Greece, Romania). As for the

economic impacts of drought at the EU level, estimates suggest losses over the last 30 years of 100 billion euros (€);

5. With respect to water scarcity, impacts have also been felt in several Member States, affecting a total population of 130 million inhabitants (27% of the EU's population); thirty three river water basins have been affected by water scarcity, representing 12% of the EU's territory and 19% of the EU's population. The most affected river basins are located in southern Europe; however, northern and eastern countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Hungary and the United Kingdom) also identified river basins subject to water scarcity;
6. The European Commission is presenting a Communication addressing the challenge of WS&D. This Communication is a fundamental and well-developed first set of proposed measures, based inter-alia on the technical work conducted within the CIS of the WFD and on the input coming from the Member States, from results of research activities undertaken at EU level and from the Stakeholder Forum meetings. The Communication provides a valuable overview of policy orientations for future action within the framework of EU water management principles, policies and objectives. It also defines a clear commitment to a European effort regarding the implementation of the foreseen actions and the development of further knowledge;
7. Water scarcity, on one side, and drought, on the other, should be considered as related but different issues that need to be dealt with using somewhat different strategies. Water scarcity should refer to long-term water imbalances between supply and demand, while drought should refer to important deviations from the average natural water availability conditions, the occurrence of which cannot be controlled and the impacts of which can be mitigated to a certain degree, namely through appropriate surveillance and management;
8. Water mismanagement is a problem that influences water scarcity and which can induce additional impacts when a drought occurs, even if it cannot generate a drought which is a natural phenomenon. In relation to water

mismanagement a clear priority should be assigned to the enforcement of demand side measures. However, WS&D impacts might not be solved through these measures alone. River Basin Management Plans, as established under the WFD, will need to take into due account both demand and supply side measures, including within-year and over-year behaviour analyses, and to consider new indispensable water supply infrastructures, only when all other measures have been tried, subject to the scrutiny of EU legislation enforcement;

9. Water scarcity issues in the affected river basins should be dealt with as much as possible through the identification of the appropriate set of measures within the River Basin Management Plans; nevertheless climate change can aggravate the existing balances;
10. A common approach to drought risk assessment and drought management plans should be adopted, bearing in mind that droughts, with their specific regional characteristics, are a common concern of all Member States, similar to an extent to concerns about flooding. The drought management plans should include transboundary coordination, public participation and early warning systems, and should be developed at different levels: European, state, river basin and local;
11. Additional work is needed and is underway to clarify the definition of “prolonged droughts” (WFD) and its implications on the achievement of the WFD environmental objectives during and after drought periods;
12. Drought management plans should include management of flow regimes, with particular concern for international river basins and appropriate monitoring actions;
13. The Commission is currently developing a European Drought Observatory which will enhance the knowledge of the drought issue, aiming at developing prototypes and set up implementing procedures for operational European Drought Observatory and early warning system by 2012. It is an important step and a further discussion on its fundamental objectives, budget, organisation and EC involvement should be welcome.

14. Climate Change (CC) is expected to influence the baseline of present WS&D difficulties, with a direct bearing on water availability and quality, affecting in particular the temporal and spatial variability of water availability and extreme hydrological events. In this way a link should be established between the two issues of WS&D and CC and their specific strategies, also bearing in mind that concerns regarding adaptation to CC should be integrated as a matter of priority in the implementation of the WFD. The adopted EC Green Paper on adaptation already focuses on these aspects;
15. The adoption of more sustainable water-related and sectoral measures - inter-alia, the integrated water resources management, the effective enforcement of pricing policies, the investment in technologies and processes with high water-saving potential and the improvement of water use efficiency, the adoption of more water-friendly land-use planning, with particular attention to the preservation of natural river basin catchment functions, and of further integration of water-related concerns into water intensive sectoral policies, and the further acquisition of high-quality information and knowledge - is a fundamental requisite to fulfilling the water policy objectives and to attaining sustainable development,
16. Coping with WS&D impacts in the EU should imply the possibility of the allocation of financial support to the Member-State regions and activities affected, in terms to be further established. It should also give access to the foreseen flexibility when implementing the WFD, by providing the opportunity to use allowed exemptions when it is necessary and justified (technically, economically and environmentally). The Member States most affected should also be encouraged to allocate a minimum percentage of Structural Funds on projects for improvement of water usage and water saving.
17. The WS&D process should be kept open for follow-up in the near future, not excluding legislative action if need be, bearing in mind that research and work on WS&D is still progressing and further results should be available by 2008.

## **SOME QUESTIONS TO BE ADRESSED AT THE DEBATE:**

- The EU Communication presents a fundamental and well developed first set of policy options to deal with WS&D issues at European level. Does it address all WS&D concerns?
- The Water Framework Directive is the EU's flagship directive on water policy, establishing the tools for achieving the good status of all European waters, and its full implementation is a priority, namely in order to address mismanagement of water resources. Does the WFD provide a solution to all water-related issues, in particular those of a quantitative nature, and do water scarcity and drought create distortions when implementing the WFD, influencing the achievement of the environmental objectives?
- Should a specific European Policy on Droughts be developed? By what legal instruments?
- Are the available European financial tools adequate to deal with WS&D events?
- Should the Commission present a follow-up program in the near future to implement the measures defined in the Communication, including legislative action if need be, bearing in mind that work and research on WS&D are still progressing?