

## World Water Day 2019: Quality on tap

Written by Rory Palmer on 22 March 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

On the occasion of World Water Day 2019, Rory Palmer writes that the Drinking Water Directive is our opportunity to address the modern challenges of supplying high-quality water to our citizens.



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When we turn on our tap, most of us will take it for granted that our drinking water will be clean and safe.

Most of the time this is the case; it is so because of a complex web of environmental, public health, safety, scientific and technological interventions.

The complexity of these interventions is such that it demands effective regulation; this is the aim of the EU's Directive on the Quality of Water Intended for Human Consumption - or the Drinking Water Directive, as it has become better known.

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This wide-ranging legislative dossier aims to ensure the continuing safety and quality of drinking water across the EU.

The legislation had not been revisited since 1999, meaning that a review was long overdue; as the S&D Shadow Rapporteur I was therefore pleased to see the Commission bringing forward new proposals.

My group adopted key priorities for the proposed legislation covering environmental sustainability; specifically, leakage reduction, water safety and quality, public health, social justice and corporate transparency.

All of these issues speak to our long-held political priorities and progressive vision for Europe.

“Ensuring everyone has a right to clean and safe water is no longer a question of science or technology, it’s a question of political will”

We are keen to see action to address the high volume of drinking water wasted through network leaks.

In my own UK constituency alone, 432 million litres of water are wasted through leakage every day.

This is not sustainable; water providers must do more, which is why I have argued for formalised leakage reduction targets for Member States.

On the public health, safety and quality issues of drinking water, our objective was for Parliament to adopt formal monitoring of Endocrine Disruptors (EDCs) in drinking water.

Understanding of the risks posed by EDCs is growing, it is something on which Parliament has previously expressed serious concern.

Thus it was consistent and appropriate for this Directive to reflect this.

At the same time, we wanted to see the renewed Directive take account of new scientific evidence and World Health Organisation guidance on other substances.

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The proposal now reflects the S&D position of stricter limits and I was pleased to see proposals to weaken monitoring parameters defeated in Committee.

A key question that arose in our political deliberations on the file was that of proportionality and risk management.

Should the same safety monitoring frequency and parameters apply to a water supplier providing tap water to hundreds of thousands of homes as apply to a smaller supplier responsible for a single village?

Shouldn't every consumer enjoy the same health and quality safeguards regardless of the size of their water supplier's network?

This is where the important risk-based approach comes into play, with the aim of ensuring that monitoring and interventions are evidence-led and based on known risk.

This should mean that drinking water is safe and the regulatory framework is proportionate relative to risk, meaning continued high compliance.

As the S&D Shadow Rapporteur, I was determined that the revised legislation should reflect our vision for social justice and equality.

I welcomed the Commission's decision to respond through this legislation to the 1.8 million signatures on the 'Right to Water' European Citizens Initiative.

This was a landmark moment for citizens engagement in the EU, becoming the first ECI to prompt a legislative response from the Commission.

I was keen to see a more ambitious approach in the Directive, with a mandate for meaningful action on the issue of access to water that went beyond warm words.

I was pleased that the S&D priorities here saw a strengthening of the overall objectives on access to water for all.

However, it was disappointing that our amendments on specific actions to deliver this were not supported by other groups in plenary.

We have made some important progress on the question of access and right to water, the glass is half full and it would be bad news if the Council sought to undermine this.

Frustratingly, the Council has been slow in reaching its negotiating position, meaning inter-institutional negotiations will now be delayed until after May's elections.

In 2019, every citizen in the EU must have access to clean, safe and affordable drinking water; this Directive is the chance to make that a reality.

I am pleased that, in key areas, the text now better reflects S&D priorities.

Ensuring everyone has a right to clean and safe water is no longer a question of science or technology, it's a question of political will.

There can be no excuse for diluting that ambition.

**About the author**

Rory Palmer (UK, S&D) is shadow rapporteur for the Recast of the Drinking Water Directive

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