The Water Framework Directive is a well-designed piece of legislation. However, without proper implementation it will remain ineffective in delivering water protection, writes Grace O’Sullivan.

As a Green politician and environmental activist, I usually find myself in the role of criticising inadequate environmental legislation.

There are countless examples in EU and national law throughout Europe of environmental protection laws that do not provide sufficient safeguards for European citizens and for the ecosystems on which we all depend.

When it comes to the EU’s laws on water protection, however, I am obliged to acknowledge that they are indeed largely fit for purpose.
You don’t have to take my word for it; a two-year review of the Water Framework Directive by the European Commission recently concluded that it has set up a robust governance framework for the integrated water management of Europe’s 110,000 rivers, lakes and wetlands.

This has helped slow the rate at which water quality is deteriorating. Sadly, however, this hasn’t been enough to stop the decline of Europe’s freshwater ecosystems.

The European Environment Agency has found that 60 percent of the EU’s water bodies are not in a good ecological state, five years after the deadline for this. Europe’s wetlands and flood plains are also suffering from serious degradation.

“All of this comes with a price tag; our failure to achieve the goals of the Water Framework Directive costs the EU up to €20bn every year”

This decline is the result of myriad pressures, from water pollutants such as nitrogen, to over-extraction as well as physical changes such as the construction of dams.

The implications of this for Europe’s ecosystems, at a time when we face a biodiversity crisis, is worrying.

The conservation status of most freshwater species listed under the Birds and Habitats Directives remains mostly unfavourable or bad. A third of European freshwater fish species are now threatened with extinction.

All of this comes with a price tag; our failure to achieve the goals of the Water Framework Directive costs the EU up to €20bn every year.

Again, those are the Commission’s figures. Scientists expect the climate crisis to increase pressure on Europe’s freshwater resources. Rises in global temperature will further exacerbate water shortages and droughts, particularly in Southern Europe.

Approximately 100 million European citizens already experience water shortages. At the same time, scientists predict higher rainfall in Northern Europe, which will make flooding events more frequent and more severe.

Many parts of my own country, Ireland, recently experienced the wettest February since records began.

In light of this, the degradation and destruction of some of our freshwater habitats, which are some of our best allies in the fight against the climate and biodiversity crises, is nothing less than reckless.
Europe needs healthy rivers, lakes and wetlands.

We need them to ensure citizens have access to clean water, to halt biodiversity loss, to tackle the climate crisis (and prepare for it) and to grow food.

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Fortunately, we do not have to waste months and years in devising a set of EU policies to protect European water quality: it already exists.

The Water Framework Directive and other related policies like the Environmental Quality Standards Directive and the Groundwater Directive, are strong because of their cross-references with other EU policies, the monitoring requirements, the list of priority substances, the non-deterioration principle and EU funding.

Yet if these Directives are so superlative, why is water quality still declining? The short answer is slow implementation, a lack of funding and a lack of sectoral integration in other policies. Member States have faced difficulties in setting up their specific governance frameworks nationally.

Perhaps one of the biggest issues is that those policy areas that are not aligned with the objectives of the Water Framework Directive include agriculture, energy and transport.

Europe needs good water protection laws, but it also needs those laws to be fully funded, implemented and enforced.

That means ensuring Member States’ third River Basin Management Plans, due by the end of 2021, are robust. It also means ensuring the Water Framework Directive’s implementation measures are fully funded and that there is a phase-out of harmful subsidies.

It also means agreeing on legally-binding targets for the protection of 30 percent of Europe’s ecosystems and the restoration of 30 percent of Europe’s degraded ecosystems, including water and wetland ecosystems.

This must include the restoration of crucial floodplains and the rewetting of drained peatlands, which are absolutely crucial measures for restoring biodiversity, cutting carbon emissions and boosting our resilience to floods, droughts and rising sea levels.

Only by tackling Europe’s water crisis will we achieve the goals of the European Green Deal.

Only by protecting and restoring Europe’s rivers, lakes and wetlands will we halt biodiversity loss, prevent the worst impacts of the climate crisis, help make Europe more climate resilient and ensure citizens have access to clean water.

Now, let’s focus our efforts on ensuring full and robust implementation, funding and enforcement of the EU’s water protection laws. We cannot afford to wait.

About the author

Grace O’Sullivan (IE, Greens/ EFA) is a shadow rapporteur on the Circular Economy report on Water Re-use
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