

Urban wastewater treatment. Recast

2022/0345(COD) - 26/10/2022 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE: to revise the rules on treating urban wastewater to better protect the health of Europeans and the environment.

PROPOSED ACT: Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: the European Parliament decides in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and on an equal footing with the Council.

BACKGROUND: the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (UWWTD) was adopted in 1991. Its objective being to protect the environment from adverse effects of wastewater discharges from urban sources and specific industries. Member States are required to ensure that wastewater from all agglomerations above 2 000 inhabitants is collected and treated according to EU minimum standards. Since its adoption the quality of European rivers, lakes and seas has greatly improved. There is a high level of compliance with the Directive across the EU, with 98% of wastewater collected and 92% satisfactorily treated.

However, pollution remains and needs to be addressed to achieve a pollution-free environment by 2050. This includes pollution from smaller cities outside the scope of the Directive and pollution caused by storm water overflows. At present, micropollutants such as residues from pharmaceuticals and cosmetics are also not covered. These residues are frequently found in all our water bodies and have a detrimental effect on nature.

Moreover, recent experience has shown that viruses can be tracked with high reliability in wastewaters: this provides precious information for public health decisions. To be able to collect the necessary data has likewise required an update of the Directive.

PURPOSE: therefore, this Commission proposal aims to revise the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive to help Europeans benefit from cleaner rivers, lakes, groundwaters and seas, while making wastewater treatment more cost-effective. To make the best possible use of wastewater as a resource, it is proposed to aim for energy-neutrality of the sector by 2040 and improve the quality of sludge to allow for more reuse contributing thus to a more circular economy.

Subject matter

The proposed Directive lays down rules on the collection, treatment, and discharge of urban wastewater to protect the environment and human health while progressively eliminating greenhouse gas emissions and improving the energy balance of urban wastewater collection and treatment activities. It also lays down rules on access to sanitation, on transparency of the urban wastewater sector and on the regular surveillance of public health relevant parameters in urban wastewaters.

Scope

To further reduce pollution, the new rules enlarge the scope of the current Directive (which applies to cities with over 2 000 inhabitants) to cover all cities with more than 1 000 inhabitants. The new rules will also cover rainwater and will require EU countries to establish integrated urban wastewater management plans in large cities (over 100 000 inhabitants initially, as well as later for cities from 10 000 inhabitants, where needed). This will reduce direct emissions of organic matter, nitrogen and phosphorus to water bodies, but also litter and microplastics captured by urban runoff. It also introduces better control of individual systems such as septic tanks, stricter standards for nutrients, and standards for micropollutants. It also requires the monitoring of greenhouse gas emissions and microplastics.

Objectives

The revision aims to:

- make the wastewater sector energy-neutral and move it towards climate neutrality by reducing energy use, using the larger surfaces of some wastewater treatments plants to produce solar/wind energy, encouraging water reuse and using sludge to produce biogas, which can substitute natural gas;
- make industry responsible for treating toxic micropollutants (polluter pays principle) that are released into the environment from the use of their products, especially harmful residues from the pharmaceutical and cosmetics sector;
- improve access to sanitation in public spaces and for the 2 million most vulnerable and marginalised people in the EU;
- require the monitoring of health parameters in wastewater in order to enhance the EU's preparedness against pandemics or other major public health threats, as is currently being done for COVID-19.

These measures will be progressively applied until 2040.