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A world's water day worthy of its name: Protecting our waters from pesticides

Water is essential for life. Yet, intensive agricultural practices release tons of pesticides into our water resources every year putting the aquatic environment and all life that depends upon it at great risk. The fact that just 40% of the water tested in Europe is in 'good ecological status', is a disgrace.

On World's Water Day, Pesticide Action Network Europe stresses out the need to protect and restore our water resources and calls upon policy-makers to "stand up for water" and take serious action to significantly reduce pesticide use in agriculture.

Recognising that water is life, the European law is designed to protect our water resources from pesticides and other sources of pollution. The target of the EU Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC (WFD) is to get all European waters into good ecological status. The Pesticide Regulation (EC) 1107/2009 states that pesticide substances or products should cause no harm to human, animals and the environment directly or via drinking water, and should not contaminate the groundwater. The Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive 2009/128/EC (SUPD) calls upon Member States to set buffer zones and protect aquatic non-target organisms. Furthermore, the EU has set strict quality standards concerning pesticides residues under the Groundwater and Drinking Water Directive (DWD) (1).

However, despite all the EU water-related policies, water resources are still under threat from human activities. In fact, 19 years after the enforcement of the WFD only 40% of the monitored European waters are in good ecological status, according to the European Environment Agency (2). Pollution from agricultural sources through water runoff, atmospheric transport and deposition, is on the top of the list. Indeed, a 2014 meta-analysis study on more than 4,000 EU water sites revealed that in 42% of the cases aquatic ecosystems are under chronic toxicity with pesticides (particularly insecticides and fungicides being the main culprits)¹ (3). Many pesticides are toxic to aquatic life and Member States must take certain measures to protect the aquatic environment from pesticide use. However, academic studies show that levels of pesticides in European rivers are much higher than the ones predicted during the safety assessment prior to their authorisation for agricultural use (5). Therefore, the impact upon aquatic ecosystems is substantially underestimated.

Moreover, about 25% of groundwater in EU is in poor chemical status, which is alarming considering that in Europe about 50 % of drinking water is taken from groundwater (4). Evidently, there is a great discrepancy between EU water policy and its implementation.

"This is not surprising" emphasizes Henriette Christensen, Senior Policy Officer at PAN Europe *"Member States have barely implemented the objectives of the Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive with just five of them making it mandatory for farmers to set buffer strips in proximity to surface waters as a*

condition to obtain funding from the Common Agricultural Policy. This is unacceptable and must change.”

“Now more than ever EU has to strengthen the implementation of its EU water policy to protect and restore the ecological status of our water resources” says Angeliki Lysimachou, PAN Europe’s Science Policy Officer and Environmental Toxicologist. This has also been the message sent by PAN Europe and PAN Germany ahead of the Commission REFIT evaluation of the WFD². The Drinking Water Directive, which sets strict limits for pesticides in drinking water has also been amended and will be in trialogue discussions among the European Institutions, after the EU elections. “On this important day we’re calling out to EU Regulators to protect our EU water policies, enforce their implementation and fight against industry’s pressures to lower our standards.” Lysimachou concludes.

Notes:

- (1) Pesticide residues must not exceed 0.1 µg/L for individual substances and 0.5 µg/L for mixtures
- (2) European Environment Agency, 2018. European waters Assessment of status and pressures 2018. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/highlights/european-waters-getting-cleaner-but>
- (3) Malaj et al. 2014. See presentation by PAN Europe: <https://bit.ly/2UNdYGR>
- (4) Stehle and Schulz, 2015. See presentation by PAN Europe: <https://bit.ly/2UNdYGR>
- (5) PAN Europe and PAN Germany position concerning the current review of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and its Daughter Directives, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TqFYTh>

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