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CALLING FOR A EUROPEAN BLUE DEAL TO SECURE EUROPE'S WATER-RESILIENT FUTURE

Europe is increasingly feeling the impacts of water scarcity and the global water crisis. Countries and regions are dealing with droughts, poor water quality, or lack of access to safe drinking water. There is a lack of water efficiency in many areas of our society, including water supply infrastructures, production processes and consumption. Overall, we are not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals related to water.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), an advisory body of the EU representing organised civil society, strongly believes that there is **a need for a change of scale in European water policies**: the current approach is fragmented and not adequately addressing the challenges in our society. An EU regulatory framework exists, but many of its objectives have not been reached, largely due to lack of funding, slow implementation and insufficient integration of water in sectoral policies, and the water dimension is not sufficiently embedded in public and private decision making. Water is not being addressed as a cross-cutting issue, but considering its role in supporting all human activities, it is the most vital resource to be preserved.

Without action, water challenges will impact ever larger parts of our society, with implications for economic, social, and political stability, also here in Europe, if water scarcity threatens people's livelihoods, such as farming, and if people are forced to migrate to have access to water. We need measures at EU level to safeguard clean water for people and our ecosystems, and to ensure a true transition to sustainable water use.

The EESC presented its call for an EU Blue Deal, a comprehensive water strategy for Europe, in October 2023. It addresses the social, economic, environmental and geopolitical aspects of water, water challenges in agriculture, industries and infrastructures as well as sustainable consumption. The EU Blue Deal Declaration puts forward 15 principles and 21 concrete actions to be adopted as a matter of urgency. **We call on the European Commission to make water a strategic standalone priority for the EU.**

Since the start, we have proposed the Blue Deal as an independent but complementary policy to the Green Deal. Why this positioning?

So far, water has been embedded in the Green Deal, whose main objective is a carbon-neutral Europe by 2050. While no EU policy can result in a net increase of our continent's carbon footprint, subsidies continue to be paid for water-intensive projects in areas with extreme water stress, and citizens have little awareness of the impact of their consumption on the amount of water available in their region and globally. If nothing changes, food production could be threatened by water scarcity, which is not acceptable.

This demonstrates that water cannot remain within the Green Deal but must be addressed as an independent policy: **Water resilience and decarbonisation have to be addressed with the same determination, and the EU therefore needs two complementary policies on a par with each other.**

It is important to underline the difference in nature between the two policies. Decarbonisation aims to combat climate change. The Blue Deal will also contribute to this aim, as water is a one dimension of climate policy, but **water cannot be limited to a purely environmental issue.** The Blue Deal and Green Deal overlap, but retain different fields of action.

For instance, as recognised by the United Nations, access to water is a human right. However, in Europe, around 10 million people do not have access to safe drinking water, and globally the amount of available drinking water is not sufficient to meet the needs. We need to invest in our water infrastructures, knowing that in some EU countries, up to 50% of water is lost due to leakages. This also justifies dedicated social policies to ensure that the most vulnerable populations are not deprived of access to clean water and sanitation.

There is an urgent need to address these issues, in addition to purely environmental considerations. The EESC therefore believes that the paradigm must change: **as the Blue Deal becomes one of the priorities of the next mandate of the Commission, all EU policies will need to be reviewed to include the water dimension.**

Finally, it should be stressed that the Blue Deal **is based on a different philosophy and methods of action than the Green Deal.** To take the example of industries, we do not recommend that companies reduce their water consumption by X % so as to achieve a "zero water impact" by 2050. Some industries could do this much faster, if the necessary technologies exist, while other sectors – such as the textile or nuclear industries to take two examples – will need much more time.

If we do not want to force these sectors to relocate by adopting standards that are too high, it is important to adopt a tailor-made, sectoral approach to defining transition pathways for each industry. The most water-consuming companies need help to succeed in their transition. Thus, while under the EU Green Deal "brown" industrial sectors have sometimes struggled to obtain financial aid to decarbonise, in the context of the EU Blue Deal **we see it as a necessity to help the most water-consuming industries to gradually adopt technologies to become more water-efficient and more competitive.** As we propose in the EU Blue Deal Declaration, this could be done through the revision of the industrial transition pathways within two years, taking into account the water, energy and critical raw materials nexus, and while providing financial support and boosting research for technologies to ensure the success of these industrial changes. This approach will preserve jobs and create new career opportunities for workers, especially in clean technologies. **Like any industrial change, the Blue Deal will succeed only if it has the resources to implement it, both in terms of financing and human resources.**

If we join forces now and adopt water as an EU priority for the years to come, it is not too late to act. The cost of inaction is higher than the cost of acting now.

The EU elections will take place in a few months. Europeans will vote and support democracy only if they feel that the European institutions provide solutions to issues that they care about. And water is a topic that we can all relate to; it is something very concrete. How will European decision makers address the issue of water and the challenges that lie ahead? Now is indeed the time to ask these questions.

We have involved stakeholders from the water sector, industries and civil society, as well as international organisations in the preparation of the EU Blue Deal. And we have seen an unprecedented amount of interest in this initiative. Stakeholders come to us proposing joint actions on this topic; they see the Blue Deal as a meaningful concept that can support their engagement on water. **There seems to be this emerging hope that the EU Blue Deal will be a turning point in achieving long term water-resilience for Europe.**

Since the start, we have worked closely also with the European Parliament, where many MEPs share our vision on the need to address water with a more strategic approach in order to ensure a water-secure future. We hope that the new Parliament will keep this commitment. This depends on our future choice, as EU citizens.

Although our call was widely welcomed, the recent postponement of the Water Resilience Initiative by the European Commission sends a worrying signal and shows that we need to continue to push for this change of scale to happen. Together with the Parliament and the European Committee of the Regions, we have called on the Commission to publish the initiative without delay, and we look forward to contributing to the public debate on the EU's water-resilient future.

We are determined and optimistic: many Member States are starting to wake up to the importance of the water crisis, although the issues affecting them might vary. Many have recently adopted national water strategies, which is an encouraging sign. We will continue to work closely with them to foster a coordinated approach at EU level; no country can tackle these challenges alone.

We will also continue to engage with organised civil society, calling for a more ambitious and comprehensive strategy on water for Europe. Europe needs and deserves an ambitious EU Blue Deal.

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