
AWRA 2007 SUMMER SPECIALTY CONFERENCE
Vail, Colorado

June 25-27, 2007

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THE EU WATER FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE: ECOLOGY VERSUS DRINKING WATER PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: The objective of the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EU, EUFD) is to achieve a “good surface and ground water status” in all EU water bodies by 2015, thereby permitting the production of drinking water without the need of complicated treatment. The “good status” is determined as an integrated assessment of chemical, hydrological, ecological and morphological quality elements. A distinction is made between the Good Chemical Status and the Good Ecological Status. For the Good Chemical Status the EUFD is very specific in presenting a list of over 30 priority pollutants, to be monitored in all water bodies. In addition, member states shall monitor series of pollutants that are specific for a given river basin and that may hamper the achievement of the Good Ecological Status. Unfortunately, most of the contaminants of concern to drinking water utilities are not on these lists. Many ecological quality demands parallel or exceed the demands for drinking water production. Consequently, many new (ecologically based) quality standards exceed existing standards for drinking water abstraction. Several quality standards for drinking water production, however, are stricter than ecological standards. If ecological criteria determine the new levels for such pollutants (notably certain herbicides), then drinking water production will still need complicated treatment. Among the water works along the Rhine concerns have risen about the way the EUFD requirements are implemented by the member states. Current economic recession and the high costs involved in sanitation, combined with the fear for financial claims due to the “result-obligation” make riparian nations reluctant to go beyond the minimum requirements. The Rhine water utilities, consequently, find it difficult to realize acceptable protection zones around intake sites and to realize water quality standards that are stricter than required from an ecological perspective. Current efforts are devoted to finding additional support from water utility associations along other (transboundary) river basins in order to address the EU.

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