

The EU Water Framework Directive

“Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy”

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) establishes a legal framework which commits EU Member States to achieve 'good status' for all ground and surface waters (rivers, lakes, transitional waters, and coastal waters up to one nautical mile from shore) by 2015.

Water management is based on management of river basins - the natural geographical and hydrological units - and specific deadlines are set to achieve environmental objectives for aquatic ecosystems.

The directive's "combined approach for point and diffuse sources" refers to several related directives. The list includes the directives on:

- Bathing Water
- Drinking Water
- Urban Wastewater Treatment
- Nitrates
- Integrated Pollution Prevention & Control
- Sewage Sludge

Implementation of these other directives is a minimum requirement and measures to implement them must be integrated into river basin management planning. The WFD works on the one-out all-out policy, meaning that if an individual quality element is not achieving good status for a particular watercourse then the entire waterbody is classified as failing.

Classifying the Ecological status

The definition of ecological status looks at the abundance of aquatic flora and fish fauna, the availability of nutrients, and aspects like salinity, temperature and pollution by chemical pollutants. Morphological features, such as quantity, water flow, water depths and structures of the river beds, are also taken into account.

The WFD classification scheme for surface water

ecological status includes five categories: high, good, moderate, poor and bad. 'Highstatus' means no or very low human pressure. 'Good status' means a 'slight' deviation from this condition, 'moderate status' means 'moderate' deviation, and so on.

The EU now has more than 100 000 surface water bodies: 80% of them rivers, 15% lakes and 5% coastal and transitional waters. The same river can contain different water bodies, since the status of the water may change.

To define good chemical status, environmental quality standards have been established for 33 new and eight previously regulated chemical pollutants of high concern across the EU.

The rules for groundwater are slightly different and good chemical and quantitative status is the objective. Member States must use geological data to identify distinct volumes of water in underground aquifers, and European law limits abstraction to a portion of the annual recharge. Groundwater should not be polluted at all – any pollution must be detected and stopped.

The ecological and chemical statuses of surface waters are assessed according to the following criteria:

- Biological quality (fish, benthic invertebrates, aquatic flora)
- Hydromorphological quality such as river bank structure, river continuity or substrate of the river bed
- Physical-chemical quality such as temperature, oxygenation and nutrient conditions
- Chemical quality that refers to environmental quality standards for river basin specific pollutants.

River Basin Districts Management Plans

The WFD introduces River Basin Districts. These areas have been designated, not according to administrative or political boundaries, but according to the river basin (the spatial catchment area of the river) as a natural geographical and hydrological unit.

As rivers often cross national borders, representatives from several Member States have to work together for the management of the basin (so-called transboundary basins). They are managed according to River Basin Management Plans, which provide a clear indication of the way the objectives set for the river basin are to be reached within the required timescale. They should be updated every six years.

There are objectives in respect of how the quality of water is protected. The key ones are general protection of the aquatic ecology, specific protection of unique and valuable habitats, protection of drinking water resources, and protection of bathing water. All these objectives must be integrated for each river basin.

It is clear that the last three - special habitats, drinking water areas and bathing water - apply only to specific bodies of water (those supporting special wetlands; those identified for drinking water abstraction; those generally used as bathing areas). In contrast, ecological protection should apply to all waters: the central requirement of the Treaty is that the environment be protected to a high level in its entirety.

Implementation of the WFD across the EU requires that member states enact certain procedures. Unlike other environmental directives that prescribe specific targets, this directive is manifestly not a target-based piece of legislation. One exception is the WFD's explicit obligation that no water bodies should experience "deterioration in status" from one class to another. But as for the 'objective' of 'good status', from a legal perspective, a member state will not have breached its obligation so long as it implements the processes required by the WFD.

Through a River Basin Management Plan, a detailed account of how the objectives set for the river basin are to be reached within the timescale required: the river basin's characteristics, a review of the impact of

human activity on the status of waters in the basin, estimation of the effect of existing legislation and the remaining "gap" to meeting these objectives; and a set of measures designed to fill the gap.

Timetable of implementation

Year	Issue	Reference
2000	Directive entered into force	Art. 25
2003	Transposition in national legislation Identification of River Basin Districts and Authorities	Art. 23 Art. 3
2004	Characterization of river basin: pressures, impacts and economic analysis	Art. 5
2006	Establishment of monitoring network Start public consultation (at the latest)	Art. 8 Art. 14
2008	Present draft river basin management plan	Art. 13
2009	Finalize river basin management plan including program of measures	Art. 13 & 11
2010	Introduce pricing policy	Art. 9
2012	Make operational programs of measures	Art. 11
2015	Meet environmental objectives First management cycle ends Second river basin management plan & first flood risk management plan	Art. 4
2021	Second management cycle ends	Art. 4 & 13
2027	Third management cycle ends, final deadline for meeting objectives	Art. 4 & 13

This factsheet is based on information provided by the European Commission.

European Commission Factsheet:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/pubs/pdf/factsheets/water-framework-directive.pdf>

Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32000L0060:EN:HTML>

DG Environment:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index_en.html

DG Environment/ Implementing the EU Water Framework Directive & the Floods Directive:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/objectives/implementation_en.htm