



Living
Rivers
Europe

Making Europe Water and Climate Resilient

Joint position for EU Action
January 2025



KEY ASKS

DELIVER THE EU GREEN DEAL. Build a resilient Europe by mitigating climate change, halting and reversing biodiversity loss, preventing pollution and limiting resource use, including water. Use National Restoration Plans to ensure synergies between water (Floods and Water Framework Directives), nature (Birds and Habitats Directives) and climate policy to enhance nature-based climate change adaptation. Ensure the Water Resilience Strategy reflects these principles by prioritising NbS and policy coherence.

SET LEGALLY BINDING WATER AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE TARGETS. Require Member States to create **EU Natural Water Reserves to protect critical water supplies and their catchments in water-stressed areas**. These would become part of the EU's water infrastructure, whose protection and restoration should be of overriding public interest. Ensure adequate, timely and predictable financing for restoring and protecting floodplains, rivers, and wetlands, and invest in natural water retention measures through mechanisms like an **EU Sponge Facility**. Launch a framework for sectoral **water efficiency and abstraction targets** at the basin level, covering all water users. **This should also include defining and implementing ecological flows based on up-to-date climate scenarios.**

MAINTAIN AND ENFORCE ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS. Strengthen the enforcement of the WFD, including increasing legal resources for the European Commission to address the backlog of complaints and cases.

INTEGRATE CLIMATE ADAPTATION INTO ALL POLICIES. Introduce an independent, scientific "Adaptation Panel" to ensure climate adaptation is embedded in all sectoral EU legislative and non-legislative acts affecting water and land use.

INTEGRATE FRESHWATER CONSIDERATIONS ACROSS EU POLICIES. Policy coherence across the legal landscape would provide robust support for achieving freshwater objectives, such as those outlined in the WFD, while aligning with broader EU commitments under the Green Deal and Sustainable Development Goals.

ELIMINATE HARMFUL SUBSIDIES. Phase out EU subsidies that harm river morphology, water quality, and natural water retention, in line with target 18 of the Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to reduce harmful incentives by at least \$500 billion per year.

BUILDING A RESILIENT EUROPE

To ensure clean and sufficient water for people and shield society from droughts and floods, we must restore and protect Europe's freshwater ecosystems. Time is running out, but decisive EU leadership can pave the way for a resilient future.

Stronger EU-level policy action is needed to improve water resilience and adapt to climate change. As the EU prepares its **Water Resilience Strategy**, this is a pivotal moment to shape policies that address Europe's intertwined water and climate crises, ensuring a holistic approach to resilience and sustainability.

Europe stands at a critical juncture. As the fastest-warming continent, we are witnessing the devastating impacts of climate change - from deadly floods to severe droughts and wildfires - all driven by extreme water events. At the same time, Europe's freshwater is widely polluted, with less than 30% of surface waters meeting pollution standards set by the Water Framework Directive (WFD). For example, [more than 220,000 people in Spain cannot access potable water](#) due to unsafe nitrate levels, and water bills across Europe are rising due to the need to remove PFAS. Following 2023's scorching heat waves, [2024 became the first year to exceed 1.5°C average temperature](#), marking a grim milestone.

The [European Environment Agency's first-ever European Climate Risk Assessment \(EUCRA\) in 2024](#) issued a stark warning: without immediate and decisive action, Europe's water and climate resilience will crumble under escalating crises, affecting food security, water supplies and economic stability. Europe must holistically tackle the triple crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. Ignoring this interconnected reality risks not only environmental collapse but also economic competitiveness, as [15% of industrial facilities in the EU are located in flood-risk areas](#), posing significant water pollution risks.

The numbers speak volumes. In 2023 alone, water and climate-related disasters cost the EU [€ 3.4 billion and claimed 151 lives](#). Catastrophic flooding in Spain, [Italy, Switzerland, France](#) and elsewhere displaced communities, devastated infrastructure, and left lasting scars on economies. [€10 billion of EU funds](#) were mobilised to relieve the worst effects of flooding in Poland and Czechia. These tragedies are not anomalies - they are warnings. We cannot afford to delay action.

Healthy freshwater ecosystems are a lifeline for Europe. More than natural assets, they are life-support systems and the foundation for a water-resilient future. They replenish aquifers, regulate the water cycle, sustain biodiversity, agriculture and communities, and carry an estimated [economic value of over €11 trillion in Europe](#). Yet decades of overexploitation and degradation have weakened this lifeline, exacerbating droughts, wildfires and floods. Unsustainable [agricultural practices remain the most significant pressure](#) on Europe's freshwater systems. To ensure water resilience and the sustainability of the food and farming sectors, Europe must maintain and enforce existing environmental legislation, including the WFD and the Nitrates Directive.

Protecting and restoring freshwater ecosystems, including ensuring ecological flows, is essential for climate adaptation and water resilience. Key measures, such as re-establishing natural water regimes, creating Natural Water Reserves and aligning sectoral policies, are detailed in the Key Asks section.

Improving water resilience requires a shift towards nature-based solutions (NbS). EUCRA underscores the need for systems-based approaches to climate adaptation, prioritising preventive, cost-efficient and low-regret measures. Systematically managing the water cycle within a catchment area is key. Restoring wetlands, reconnecting rivers to floodplains, and implementing natural water retention measures delivers multiple benefits for both nature and people, such as increased resilience to extreme weather, improved water quality and availability and enhanced carbon storage while supporting biodiversity.

This aligns with the [Council Conclusions on the 8th Environmental Action Programme](#) to systematically prioritise NbS as a pathway to resilience and the EC's stated priority of repairing the broken water cycle with a source-to-sea approach.

Avoiding maladaptive infrastructure: shifting away from grey solutions. Improving water management should not mean building more grey infrastructure to contain, transport, pump or store water, [as this decreases the resilience of ecosystems and increases social vulnerability](#). Climate “whiplash” events, swinging rapidly between extremely wet and dry conditions, are [becoming more frequent and severe](#). Climate models predict intensifying extremes in regions like the Mediterranean, with heavier rainfall coupled with prolonged droughts. Relying solely on grey infrastructure - dams, channels and artificial reservoirs - risks maladaptation, exacerbates societal inequalities and exposes communities to future extremes. Instead, [systemic approaches that enhance NbS](#) are [essential to address these challenges](#), [strengthen overall resilience](#) and secure Europe’s future.

The path forward for a resilient and climate Europe

The scale of the water and climate crises demands bold, systemic action. The upcoming Water Resilience Strategy offers the EU an unprecedented opportunity to integrate NbS into policy frameworks, align resilience goals across sectors and address Europe’s escalating water challenges. By prioritising the restoration of freshwater ecosystems, scaling up NbS, and embedding resilience into policy coherence, the EU can lead the way towards a sustainable, water-resilient future. This is not just an environmental imperative - it is essential for the security, stability, and prosperity of the EU.

For more information, see [LRE’s position paper for a water-resilient Europe](#).

Living Rivers Europe is a coalition of six environmental and angling organisations: WWF’s European network, the European Anglers Alliance, European Environmental Bureau, European Rivers Network, Wetlands International Europe and The Nature Conservancy.

