

Opening remarks of First Vice-President Timmermans and Commissioner Vella at the Press Conference on the Revision of the EU Drinking Water Directive

Remarks of First Vice-President Frans Timmermans

Good afternoon to all of you.

I'm really pleased to be here with Commissioner Vella in a week which has seen him shining a light on the work the Commission does in issues that are extremely important to our citizens: health and safety.

After we tackled the issue of plastics together, Karmenu and I, two weeks ago, he has focused on air quality this week, and it is now time for us to talk about water quality.

This Commission is strong on sustainability, and as we adapt to the challenges of the new world, we must listen to the wishes of our citizens and match them with policies which are fit for purpose.

That is why today we propose to revise the EU Drinking Water Directive.

And we do so because this is a topic which is close to Europeans' hearts. Water was the subject of the first ever successful European Citizens' Initiative, with over 1.6 million people supporting the Right2Water Initiative before it was submitted to the Commission.

We then launched an EU-wide public consultation and a comprehensive evaluation of the Directive under our "REFIT" programme for Better Regulation.

On the basis of the popular support and of this thorough analysis, we decided to revise the Directive.

So what you have today is a proposal that is the successful and positive culmination of a European Citizens' Initiative and an example of what our Better Regulation approach can deliver.

And it is also part of our implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which clearly states that everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water.

The EU has committed itself to deliver access to clean water and sanitation under the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal Number 6).

This importance of access to drinking water should not be under-estimated. It is estimated that 23 million people in the EU are not connected to Public Water Supply systems, for a variety of reasons.

My final reason for doing this is that it helps us to concretely deliver on the Plastics Strategy which we announced two weeks ago.

By increasing the confidence of citizens in the safety of their tap water we can also significantly contribute to the reduction of the use of plastic bottles.

It is estimated that better water quality could reduce bottled water consumption by 17%, thus reducing the amount of single use plastics that we produce and then throw away.

One example of how the Directive proposes to achieve this is through encouraging restaurants, canteens and catering services to provide free tap water to their customers.

I think this is a good proposal for our environment, I think it's a good proposal for our citizens' health and for their pockets as well.

I would like to commend the organisers of the European Citizens' Initiative for putting this issue on the table and continuing to fight for their goals and work with us in recent years. And we will continue working with them in the future.

Today's proposal shows that citizens *can* make themselves heard, be part of the debate, and help shape policies in the EU.

And once the Council and Parliament adopt our European Citizens' Initiative reform proposals, it will become even easier for citizens to use this important instrument for European democracy.

I hope that in the future even more Citizens' Initiatives will come about and have the kind of success that Right2Water has had.

And now it's high time for me to hand over to Karmenu Vella, who will explain further what we're actually proposing.

Remarks of Commissioner Karmenu Vella

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Protecting citizens is the priority of Jean-Claude Juncker's European Commission.

After Tuesday's meeting with Environment Ministers from 9 EU Member States on Air Quality we are presenting today a proposal to make drinking water safe for the 21st century.

Safe drinking water is essential for people's health. Most people living in the EU enjoy drinking water that is of the highest standard in the world.

That's the result of over 30 years of successful EU drinking water policies and rules. A perfect illustration of a Europe that protects. Something to be proud of.

But new substances are emerging and they present a potential threat to water quality and safety. Pathogenic bacteria or new contaminants from industry.

To preserve the quality of drinking water in the long run and to protect consumers from these potential risks we are modernising the Drinking Water Directive and bringing it up to the latest standard.

After a very thorough analysis we are proposing to add 18 new and emerging substances to the list of criteria for determining water safety. Legionella, BPA, chlorate, to name just a few. We have worked very closely with the World Health Organisation in updating this list of parameters and quality standards.

We are also proposing a new system of assessing risks to water safety adding another layer of protection and better targeting of safety checks where needed.

We are also applying this approach to microplastics. There is no conclusive evidence that they pose a threat to water supply, but we want to be on the safe side. If it is established through monitoring that microplastics pose a threat, water suppliers will have to act and make sure they don't pollute tap water.

The trust and confidence of European citizens are absolutely vital to us. As water is so essential to our health and well-being, people need to have full confidence that the water they use for preparing food for their loved ones, and that they use for their tea and coffee, is safe.

This aspect is another key element of our proposal. Consumers will be able to easily access information online on the quality and safety of their tap water. They will have information at their fingertips on the health impact of nutrients, or advice on how to reduce consumption. Not to mention clear and simple water bills.

With this we are responding to a demand that was expressed very strongly in our public consultation. More transparency empowers consumers and will improve their confidence in tap water. A litre of tap water costs 0.2 cent. Compare this to the price for a litre of bottled water. If people rely more on tap water, households can potentially save more than EUR 600 million a year.

The new measures also boost our drive for more resource efficiency, and can help cut plastic waste from bottled water. Plastic bottles are among the most common single use plastic items found on European beaches. The Plastics Strategy that we put forward two weeks ago shows we are serious about tackling waste from single-use plastic items. The revision of the Drinking Water Directive is the first legislative step in putting this Strategy into action.

To conclude:

The proposal we adopted today is ambitious. It is good for people's health, and it is good news for the planet.

It ensures that tap water is perfectly safe and healthy everywhere in Europe.