

Safer drinking water for all Europeans: Questions and Answers

Why is the Commission revising the Drinking Water Directive?

The European Commission wants to continue to ensure the provision of high-quality drinking water in light of the latest scientific advice, and to help consumers access this water and find reliable information about its supply. Safe drinking water is essential for public health and well-being, and water contamination or shortages can have serious social and economic costs.

The proposal is also a response to the successful European Citizens' Initiative, '[Right2Water](#)', which received the support of 1.6 million Europeans.

What is the Commission proposing and why?

There are four main new elements:

- 1) **Improved standards for the safety of water.** The list of standards will be updated and extended in line with the latest scientific knowledge and based on recommendations by the World Health Organisation. This will guarantee that tap water is safe for drinking throughout the EU.
- 2) **A reduced risk for Member States and citizens.** By applying a risk-based water safety assessment in the entire EU, authorities will be able to identify possible risks to water sources already at distribution level. It adds an additional layer of protection and at the same time better protects supply sources in the long term.
- 3) **Obligation to improve access to water.** People without or with limited access to water will benefit. Overall consumption of tap water – a cheap, safe and environmentally-friendly option – should increase. This will help consumers save money, and it is good for the environment, helping to reduce plastic waste entering our rivers and seas and lowering greenhouse gas emissions.
- 4) **Increased transparency,** including on water services. Thanks to new transparency rules consumers will get information online, in a user-friendly way, about the availability of water services in their local area. Empowered consumers are better placed to request good quality services at a fair price.

In parallel, the Commission accelerated work on standardisation to ensure that construction products in the water sector across the EU's internal market, such as pipes and tanks, do not pollute drinking water.

What are the new standards to indicate the safety of water?

The Commission has worked with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to revise the list of standards (parameters) that define safe drinking water. The new

list includes 18 new or revised parameters to better protect against:

- pathogenic bacteria and viruses;
- naturally occurring but harmful substances like uranium or microcystins;
- emerging contaminants from industry like perfluorinated compounds;
- disinfection by-products or distribution impurities like chlorate, haloacetic acids, or bisphenol A.

How will consumers benefit from this proposal?

The revised rules will improve access to water and water quality as well as further reduce risks to health, by improving water treatment and quality monitoring. According to [estimates](#) the new measures would reduce potential health risks associated with drinking water from about 4% to below 1%. More transparency on water supply can compel providers to improve resource-efficiency. Consumers will have online access to information on precious nutrients present in their tap water, such as calcium or magnesium.

Higher confidence in tap water can reduce bottled water consumption. Overall, estimates show that lower consumption of bottled water can help households in Europe save more than €600 million per year.

What was the European Citizens' Initiative 'Right2Water' about?

The EU Treaty allows at least 1 million citizens to invite the European Commission to submit a legislative proposal. In December 2013, the initiative entitled 'Water and sanitation are a human right! Water is a public good, not a commodity!' ('[Right2Water](#)') was submitted to the Commission. It gathered more than 1.6 million signatures of support from citizens and was therefore the first European Citizens' Initiative to successfully collect the required threshold. The initiative called in particular for "legislation implementing the human right to water and sanitation as recognised by the United Nations and promoting the provision of water and sanitation as essential public services for all". The organisers were received by the European Commission and a hearing took place at the European Parliament on 17 February 2014. On 19 March 2014 the Commission published its [positive response](#) in a Communication and has since implemented a series of [follow-up actions](#).

The proposal to revise the Drinking Water Directive, which was preceded by an evaluation of existing legislation and a public consultation, is the latest of these actions. It contains an obligation for Member States to improve access to safe drinking water for all and to ensure access to water especially for vulnerable and marginalised groups. Other follow-up actions have focused on improving transparency and benchmarking of water quality and services, as well as contributions to access water and sanitation in the context of development cooperation and sustainable development.

Does the proposal guarantee access to water for all?

The right to water and sanitation was at the centre of the European Citizens' Initiative Right2Water. One of the ways that the Commission is putting this into action is through the new [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) unanimously

agreed by Heads of State or Government at the Gothenburg Summit, which includes the principle that *“everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need.”* The proposal to revise the Drinking Water Directive reflects this principle with a new provision that requires Member States to improve access to water for all and ensure access to those belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups.

What will the changes mean for Member States?

Simpler reporting obligations will lower the administrative burden for authorities. Member States will need to develop specific national risk assessment plans and/or guidance, together with training for affected stakeholders. This new concept will require better cooperation between water suppliers and the authorities responsible for environmental protection of rivers, lakes, and nature. The risk-based approach will prevent possible contamination that could endanger drinking water and its sources.

What will the changes mean for water suppliers?

Thanks to the new risk-based approach, water suppliers will be able to better target their monitoring activities and treatment measures once they have demonstrated that the water source is not contaminated by certain substances. This will lower their costs by reducing unnecessary treatment and monitoring for non-present substances. Increased transparency is also a positive thing for water suppliers in their relations with their customers.

What will the changes mean for manufacturers of products that come into contact with drinking water (like pipes and taps)?

The proposal does not regulate individual products. It sets the rules on permitted amounts of certain substances in water, and thus gives very clear guidance for the production of hygienically safe pipes and taps.

For example, it includes new microbiological parameters to avoid biofilms and microbiological growth within the distribution system, strengthens the requirements for lead and chromium to prevent undesired migration from metals into tap water, and imposes strict limits for Acrylamide, Bisphenol A, Epichlorohydrin, Nonylphenol, PFAS, or Vinyl chloride, which will ensure safe plastic components.

In addition, technical standards that are being developed under the [Construction Products Regulation](#) will significantly reduce the need for multiple testing procedures by developing EU-wide standards. This should bring down the cost for approval procedures and improve market access for companies across the EU.

How are microplastics addressed in the Directive?

In line with the precautionary principle, the proposal addresses microplastics, which are an issue of emerging concern. Microplastics which are considered relevant based on a hazard assessment will be regularly

monitored in water bodies used for the abstraction of drinking water, so that mitigation measures can be taken where necessary. Water suppliers can carry out additional monitoring and treatment to ensure that drinking water is free from microplastics.

The issue of microplastics is also addressed in the new [EU strategy for plastics in the Circular Economy](#). The Commission has started work through [REACH](#) to restrict the use of microplastics that are intentionally added in products.

How much will these changes cost?

A thorough impact assessment accompanies the Commission's proposal. It concludes that the significant positive health benefits of safer drinking water will clearly offset the moderate costs. Better access to and quality of drinking water, as well as increased transparency requirements obviously entail additional but moderate costs. However, these will be offset by the positive health benefits for citizens and the possibility for Member States to subsidise a service of public interest, as well as the money saved through lower consumption of bottled water.

The current annual cost of the drinking water sector, eventually paid by consumers in their water bills, is around €46.3 billion. Without the proposed legislation, it is expected to rise very moderately to €47.9 billion in the coming decades. The changes foreseen in the current proposal would generate a moderate annual increase between €1.6 billion to €2.2 billion per year.

Household spending on water services is expected to increase on average across the EU only slightly, from the current 0.73% to 0.75-0.76%. Since Member States have a margin of discretion (e.g. for subsidising), actual costs would most likely be even smaller. Finally, lower consumption of bottled water can help households in Europe save more than €600 million per year.