

To: **Executive Vice-President Frans Timmermans,
Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius**

6 December 2019

OPEN LETTER

Re: Europe's biodiversity depends on healthy freshwater ecosystems: Save the Water Framework Directive

Dear Executive Vice-President, Dear Commissioner,

We, the undersigned scientists, stand for the preservation of the EU clean water law, the Water Framework Directive. We urge Member States and this new European Commission to preserve the Water Framework Directive in its current form and step up its implementation, as the key to ensuring that freshwater ecosystems and all the ecosystems they feed are healthy and resilient for nature and people.

Freshwater ecosystems are the heart of nature, flowing through and connecting different ecosystems together, from deserts to mountains. Rivers, lakes, wetlands, groundwater aquifers, and ponds, in addition to housing rich biodiversity, provide a **wide array of ecosystem services for humans**, from mitigating the impacts of floods, to supporting ecotourism and agricultural production.

Yet, freshwater ecosystems are amongst the most threatened on the planet. Worldwide, freshwater species populations have declined by 83% in the last decades¹. In Europe specifically, 60% of surface waters are currently not in good status and freshwater species are also amongst the most threatened in Europe. European wetlands, which serve as natural carbon sinks, have decreased by 50% since the 1970s². All this has made freshwater species particularly vulnerable. **Aquatic insects have suffered a severe decline in numbers, and freshwater fish and amphibians are amongst the most vulnerable groups of threatened European species.** Their severe decline presents a major obstacle to fulfilling any biodiversity targets in the future, and impacts many other species negatively, such as birds and mammals.

With our freshwater ecosystems suffering from multiple pressures, their natural ability to regulate the quality, quantity and pattern of freshwater flows is impeded, and they can no longer provide the valuable services that we as a society desperately need in the present, and which will be even more needed in the near future.

¹ WWF Living Planet Report, 2018

² Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019

With the increasing risk and rise in Europe of droughts, floods and wildfires -- as experienced this summer -- resilient water ecosystems are becoming more vital than ever. Healthy surface and groundwater bodies are absolutely crucial to help us cope with these events.

The EU, in 2000, adopted the EU Water Framework Directive, an integrated and holistic environmental regulation. The Directive was designed to ensure that we will have healthy and resilient freshwater bodies to support people and nature, today and in the future.

The strength of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) lies in:

- Its holistic approach of integrating all parts of the wider environment as well as economic and social systems, which is essential for the success of any water management efforts.
- The economic potential of full WFD implementation goes beyond the implementation costs of the directive, as it needs to account for the social, public health, and cultural benefits of having healthy freshwater ecosystems.
- The effectiveness of the WFD, as is the case for any EU environmental regulation, depends upon its practical implementation by the Member States. When implemented, the Directive, since 2000, has led to some positive results, from the decrease of pollution with a number of harmful substances, such as lead and nickel, to specific successful restoration cases.
- For further improvements in water quality and quantity to be achieved, implementation needs a new impetus from both Member States and the European Commission. Acknowledging the holistic and systemic intent of the Directive is required in its implementation, for it to deliver its full potential³.

In the light of this year's IPBES report on global biodiversity loss⁴, the time is now for Member States to implement and for the new European Commission to enforce the EU's existing environmental laws, such as the EU Water Framework Directive, to halt and reverse this catastrophic trend.

We, the undersigned scientists, stand with the 375K European citizens who want the Member States and the European Commission to focus on enforcing environmental regulations rather than weakening them.

We urge Member States and urge this new European Commission to **preserve the Water Framework Directive in its current form**, as the key to ensuring that freshwater ecosystems and all the ecosystems they feed are healthy and resilient for nature and people.

There cannot be an effective European Green Deal without healthy freshwater ecosystems at the heart of it.

³ [“The EU Water Framework Directive: From great expectations to problems with implementation”](#)

⁴ Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, 2019

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