

The EU's 'Blue Deal'

Why Europe's construction sector urgently needs a comprehensive European Union water policy

With the increasing frequency and intensity of droughts, heatwaves and other extreme weather events, the EU is confronted with many water challenges that could not only directly affect civil society but also greatly impact Europe's construction sector as one of the main consumers of water if no action is taken.

Luckily, the EU is, slowly but surely, becoming aware of the problem and started working in July on what is already called the "EU Blue Deal", inspired by the "European Green Deal", launched in 2019 by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen.

Under the impression of another summer full of new droughts, intense heatwaves, wildfires in the southern and western parts of the continent and still alarmingly low groundwater levels, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), one of the EU's consultative bodies composed of representatives of "social partners" (employers' organisations and trade unions) and of civil society, adopted six key recommendations for a comprehensive water policy in Europe at its plenary session in July.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NEW WATER POLICY IN EUROPE

The EESC is due to officially present its recommendations to the EU institutions at a "Call for an EU Blue Deal" conference on 26 October, where it is expected that it will urge the European Commission to start addressing water as a priority

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at European scale.

The EESC recommendations are based on a European Parliament resolution on "Consequences of drought, fire, and other extreme weather phenomena: increasing the EU's efforts to fight climate change" that was adopted in September 2022.

Following this resolution, the EU confirmed its strong engagement for global water security and resilience and called at the UN Water Conference in March 2023 for a "more integrated approach to the management of water resources across sectors" and for "promoting circularity in the use of water for industry" by increasing water efficiency and water reuse.

In its July recommendations, the EESC calls on the European Commission to develop a new EU water policy, including a comprehensive sustainable water management policy for industry based on reducing, reusing and recycling water, and for a roadmap supporting

industries in becoming water efficient in an incremental manner, with milestones and a sectoral approach.

CONSTRUCTION CITED AS ONE OF THE MAIN WATER INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES

It is no surprise that the EESC's opinion on "Water-intensive industries and water-efficient technologies" also cites construction as one of the main water intensive industries in the EU, alongside mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity production, agriculture and transport.

Construction sites use a vast amount of water: It is for example used to control dust and debris during excavation, demolition, and other construction activities, but also for on-site cabins and general cleaning.

The water footprint of widely used construction materials, such as steel, cement and glass, is also known to be high.

But despite new regulatory requirements it will impose on construction businesses, the "Blue Deal" can be for the benefit of Europe's construction sector. There is already much companies can do to save water, such as installing water-saving devices on construction sites or using harvested rainwater for cleaning.

However, a "Blue Deal" can help the whole construction value chain become more water efficient, which will soon become inevitable if it is to remain competitive on a global scale.

A "BLUE DEAL" CAN BE FOR THE BENEFIT OF CONSTRUCTION

The European construction industry, just like other industrial sectors, needs a new EU "Blue Deal", or a

"European Water Pact" as Emma Weisner, one of the European Parliament's most influential members sitting on the environment committee, described it in an article in June 2023.

It goes without saying that the interests of the construction industry must be taken into account in an adequate manner by the EU – in close cooperation with the concerned representative stakeholders – when designing new water policies, but it cannot be denied that water is an increasingly scarce resource – even in Europe, where high-quality water is still largely available – and that this situation requires swift action.

It is therefore high time that EU policymakers start thinking about adequate and forward-looking solutions, label water as one of the EU's critical raw materials and make it a top priority of the block's Industrial Strategy.

Seeing that water is likely to be an important topic of the 2024-2029 legislative term is a good sign – also for the construction sector.

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