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MEPS AGREE ON WASTEWATER RULES BUT FALL SHORT ON MICROPOLLUTANTS

MEPs in the European Parliament’s environmental committee agreed to update existing rules for wastewater treatment, but significantly weakened rules for the removal of micropollutants carried by wastewater.

Today the Environmental committee in the European Parliament voted on new EU rules on urban wastewater treatment, updating the existing 30-year-old Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive.

Extending existing rules

MEPs voted to extend the scope of the Directive to cover smaller agglomerations, starting from those treating wastewater from the equivalent of 750 people, but at the same time pushed the deadline for compliance with basic wastewater treatment to 2032, two years later than what the European Commission had proposed.

The Committee also approved new rules for nutrient removal that will apply for medium-sized and large wastewater treatment plants progressively until 2043, three years later than the Commission’s proposed timeline.

Sara Johansson, Senior Policy Officer at the European Environmental Bureau, said:

“Wastewater carries a fingerprint of the pollution our society creates and is a known pressure on aquatic ecosystems. MEPs today showed they are ready to update wastewater treatment rules, but do not yet seem to understand the risk of micropollutants spread via wastewater, including sewage spills.”

Lucille Labayle, Water Quality and Health Policy Officer at Surfrider Foundation Europe, said:

“Today’s vote generates very mixed feelings. On the one hand we praise the ENVI Committee’s efforts to tackle biomedica pollution and strengthen the Commission’s proposal in this sense. On the other, despite upgrading the Directive’s scope and some of the rules for wastewater management, we deeply regret that outcome of this vote does not equate the level of ambition needed to act swiftly on chemical pollution.”

MEPs confirmed their willingness to address the issue of biomedica pollution. Securing the inclusion of this source of microplastic and chemical pollution and advocating for mandatory preventive measures constitute a major step to address the chronic and acute threats they pose to the environment.

de la Commission européenne à ce sujet. D'autre part, malgré l'amélioration certaines règles relatives à la gestion des eaux usées, nous regrettons profondément que le résultat de ce vote ne soit pas à la hauteur du niveau d'ambition nécessaire pour agir rapidement sur la pollution chimique. »

Resistance to new rules on micropollutants and polluter pays

When it comes to new rules on the removal of micropollutants that pose risk to environmental and human health, such as pharmaceutical residues, the Committee significantly weakened the Commission’s proposal in terms of which plants will need to be upgraded. The approved standards fall far behind existing practices in other countries, like Switzerland, and diluted the rules for river protection.

On top of that, the Committee watered down the Commission’s proposal that the cost to upgrade wastewater treatment to remove micropollutants should be borne by the producers and importers of the products that give rise to the pollution, via an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). New exemptions were introduced and a part of the upgrade cost can be covered by the public budget.

Climate adaptation and sewage spills

Finally, MEPs approved that towns and cities should set up plans to handle urban wastewater to prevent sewage spills caused by rain. However, these plans would not be made available to the public, although they contain environmental information. Additionally, an alternative goal to limit sewage spills was introduced which is laxer than existing poor practices in Europe.

Now it's up to the full Parliament to have their say in the upcoming plenary vote in October.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

The European Commission proposed in October 2022 a recast Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive that updates the existing 1991 Directive.

The Commission's plan updates existing rules for urban wastewater treatment and introduces new requirements to control micropollutant release, limit sewage spills and hold polluters accountable, via interim targets until 2040.

Environmental Ministers in the Council are forming their opinion on the Commission's proposal with a planned agreement for 16 October ENVI Council.

About Surfrider Foundation Europe

Surfrider Foundation is a group of positive activists who take concrete action on the ground every day to pass on a preserved ocean to future generations. Our mission: to make the voice of the ocean heard loud and clear! Our weapons? Raising awareness and mobilising citizens, children and adults alike (thanks in particular to 48 volunteer branches throughout Europe), using our scientific expertise to lobby and transform companies. Find out more about the association on <https://surfrider.eu/>

About European Environmental Bureau

EEB is the largest network of citizens' environmental organisations in Europe. It currently has over 180 member organisations in 40 countries, including a growing number of networks, and represents some 30 million individual members and supporters. We advocate progressive policies to create a better environment in the European Union and beyond. Find out more about the association at <https://eeb.org/about/>

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