

We need a paradigm shift in water management



□□In this interview, Piotr Całbecki (PL/EPP), President of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Region, answers five questions related to water management in the context of the COVID-19 and unabated global warming. The rapporteur of the CoR opinion on [‘The Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive’](#) calls for a paradigm shift that places circularity and sustainability at the centre of our way of using natural resources, and water in particular. The draft opinion will voted on at the next [ENVE Commission meeting on 8 June](#). The opinion is scheduled to be adopted at the 1-2 July plenary session alongside a high-level debate on the European Green Deal.

As the rapporteur on the Water Framework Directive, could you tell us why this topic is important for the EU and its regions and cities? How do you assess its implementation after 20 years of entering into force and what lessons can we draw?

The Water Framework Directive has had very positive effects. Not only by improving the ecological status of freshwater and coastal ecosystems in

Europe, but also by raising our society's environmental awareness. However, after 20 years of implementation, new challenges as well as new solutions have arisen. Among the new challenges we face are the increasing symptoms of global warming and the urgent necessity to implement the European Green Deal and a new strategy to boost the circular economy and the bio-economy. First, we need systemic solutions, which will transform the threat of droughts into opportunities, starting by integrating the Water Framework Directive and the Flood Directives. In addition, we need to disseminate innovative solutions and exploit the opportunities created by eco-hydrology and nature-based solutions. These are effective tools, especially for mitigating intermediate impacts, such as non-point source pollutions from agriculture and urbanised areas, which generate about 50% of pollutants in some catchment areas.

You are the President of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Region. Water scarcity and droughts are also a growing challenge in Poland. How important is it to involve regional and local authorities in water management?

The Kujawsko-Pomorskie Region is one of the most diversified regions in Poland when it comes to water resources. Yet, we also face problems that we need to solve urgently. Water levels in the Vistula river have dramatically decreased due to droughts in recent years. On the southern part of our region, intensive agricultural land has been exposed to water scarcity, which has generated soil erosion, non-point source pollution to lakes and rivers, and a long-term decline in sustainability. However, in the northern part of the region, large natural forests and lakes are a paradise for biodiversity. As a regional president with a university degree in the restoration of lakes, I am well placed to know that local and regional authorities are pivotal to water management. We are best placed to identify the specific challenges that each territory and community is facing, but we are also better positioned to develop tailored policies that consider those same specificities.

Climate change and the COVID-9 pandemic are having a great impact on water resources, services and delivery across Europe and around the world. What should be done to ensure that clean, good-quality water is accessible to everyone?

We have to change our perception of how we interact with nature. We must transform the ongoing mechanistic approach through which we allow ourselves to consume natural resources blindly and without control, not least as we are constantly depositing back waste and pollutants. We need to evolve and embrace an ecosystem approach that places circularity at the centre of our way of using natural resources, and water in particular. Sustainability in water management is not possible without responsible, inclusive decision-making that ensures clean water is accessible to everyone.

Your opinion will also contribute to the Zero-Pollution Action Plan for air, water and soil that the European Commission will present next year. What would be your main message in this context?

My main message is that we need to change our relationship with nature and, consequently, to develop environmentally respectful policies. In the Anthropocene age in which we live, a period in which human activity is the

dominant influence on climate and the environment, we must all become responsible decision-makers. Will we continue to degrade nature and pose a direct threat to human civilisation, or will we learn to manage resources in a sustainable way? We have a great opportunity to move towards a circular economy that is respectful to the environment, consuming water and other vital resources in a sustainable way. The Zero-Pollution Action Plan for air, water and soil is a pivotal point in that shift.

Your opinion concerns challenges related to floods, water pollution and the environmental consequences of human activity. What instruments do local and regional authorities need in order to respond better to these challenges?

The impact of human activity on the environment and water resources in particular have a cumulative effect and are creating a dangerous spiral. We need a new paradigm based on scientific evidence that helps local and regional authorities to make the best policy choices. To achieve this, it is important to establish permanent cooperation between local and regional policy-makers and scientists. As an example, we are proud of mentioning our cooperation with Professor Maciej Zalewski, the director of the European Regional Centre for Ecohydrology (ERCE), the international institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences devoted to the study of interactions between water and ecological systems.

As a second step, we need additional instruments to reinforce education about sustainability, raising awareness in our communities and developing knowledge and values that lead to more sustainable patterns of living. The digital world brings huge opportunities for citizens to be directly involved in this endeavour. A mobile application recently developed by the project [AMBER](#) (Adaptive Management of Barriers in European Rivers) is a good example, as it also includes a 'citizen science' programme to involve authorities, NGOs and the public in data collection and dissemination. Today, the European Green Deal offers new opportunities, as it provides a coherent vision based on a solid inter-disciplinary framework. That is why I am optimistic about the future.

Notes:

The draft opinion [‘Fitness Check of the Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive’](#) by rapporteur [Piotr Całbecki](#) (PL/EPP) is [available in 23 EU languages](#) and will be voted during the next ENVE commission meeting on 8 June. Meeting documents are [downloadable here](#).

A third of EU's land suffers from water stress. Water scarcity is a concern in many Member States. While climate change results in unpredictable weather patterns, increasing droughts and shortfalls in the quantity and quality of freshwater resources are to be expected. [CoR Press Release 11/12/2018 on ‘Reusing water for agriculture and keeping our urban areas green.’](#)

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