

The water challenge

By Emily Smith

Any attempt to represent interests as diverse as those of chemical engineers, environmental lobbyists and the hydraulics industry might sound like an ambitious plan. But it is a challenge the European Water Partnership (EWP) was formed to address last year.

Fritz Barth, vice chairman of the EWP, said that the idea was born at a meeting in Mexico, organised by the World Water Council, an organisation bringing together water interest group representatives.

"We very clearly saw here that European input was very badly organised, very fragmented," said Barth. Several European participants at the Mexico meeting therefore decided to set up an EU version of the World Water Council which, like its international equivalent, would work to raise political and public awareness of the challenges facing the water sector.

The EWP today has 39 members, mostly research, technical and conservation groups, along with representatives of the German and Dutch water industries.

The group hopes to make people understand that "water consumption is too high", said Barth. "In the past people have tried to solve this problem through water supply measures," he added. "Now it is time to tackle demand."

The amount of water used varies greatly across the EU. Germans get through 150 litres per person per day, while in southern Europe – where water shortages are most acute – the average is 400 litres per day.

Barth admitted that, for health and hygiene reasons, personal water consumption in warmer countries could

not be cut too drastically. But he said that companies were also using too much water to provide produce goods and services.

The EWP hopes that attitudes in this area would follow thinking on climate change, where the industry is widely expected to work to reduce its 'carbon footprint' – the amount of carbon dioxide it emits. "We need a behavioural change," said Barth. "Companies should start thinking about their water footprint when they work."

Another problem which should be tackled across the EU is the loss of water as it is transported along pipelines. On average, 40% of drinking water is lost through pipe leaks in the EU today – much more in some parts of eastern Europe.

As well as using more efficient production methods and safer pipelines to reduce water consumption or leaks, said Barth, some fundamental changes might have to be accepted. Shifting to less water-intensive crops and improved irrigation systems, he said, could dramatically cut water use in the southern European agriculture sector.

Barth added that he was worried that intensive crop production would grow to meet new EU targets for an increased use of plant-based biofuels.

But Ute Papenfuss of EU farmers' representatives Copa-Cogeca said that the agriculture sector faced stiff EU legislation to ensure that any crops, whether grown for biofuels or for human consumption, did not pose an environmental resource risk.

"Farmers who do not respect EU sustainability legislation and the environment have to pay a double fine," said Papenfuss. "There is the normal infringement procedure, but also a second fine under the CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] cross-compliance mechanism," she explained, adding: "Some non-governmental organisations and journalists are misleading the public on this."

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