EuropeanVoice.com
AN INDEPENDENT VIEW OF THE EU

Vol. 13 No. 26 : 5 July 2007

# WHY EUROPE NEEDS A WATER STRATEGY

By Richard Seeber and Marian Harkin

## Two MEPs discuss water.

Richard Seeber (Austrian centre-right MEP. He is a member of the Parliament's committee on the environment, public health and food safety.)

On average, every European citizen uses 50 litres of fresh water per day. Showering, drinking and flushing. On average, we eat up to 8,000 litres of fresh water per day: for every vegetal calorie produced one litre of water is used, for every calorie coming from animal production this amount increases ten-fold. In 1950 the Earth was inhabited by 1.7 billion people. This number has nearly quadrupled, with 6.5bn humans needing water every day.

Do the arithmetic yourself: it does not add up to what we have in terms of water resources. For decades we have lulled ourselves into the belief that fresh water is a renewable resource always coming back with the rain. But this belief does not seem to hold the water anymore.

The use of fresh water increases twice as quickly as the world's population grows. Today we are already tapping massively into fossil resources stemming from the last ice age – and those reservoirs will not refill. Gigantic water supplies below the Sahara are sucked dry by an equally huge pipeline irrigating Libyan fields. The US is also tapping into its fossil deposits.

Ten years ago, on the Indian crop fields in the Punjab, you had to drill to a depth of 90 metres to pump up water - today the level has fallen to 270m. In Beijing, water levels drop half a metre – per day. There is nothing coming back.

Apparently we are using up our water resources more quickly than the world's oil deposits, but too few people know or talk about it. Currently 'climate change' is the magic word, having created a huge emotional upsurge in interest and worries and not only in Europe. But we have to take great care not to be carried away and lose our perspective in becoming climate change fundamentalists. I agree that we have to find alternative energy solutions to free ourselves from our dependency on fossil energy and to better the carbon dioxide balance. But studies indicate that the production of bioethanol uses incredible amounts of water.

We cannot alter the fact that water is unevenly distributed even within Europe. Alpine countries have fresh water in abundance, others, such as Spain, suffer from regular draughts in increasing intensity and duration. Every summer many rivers shrink to rivulets or dry up completely. Preserving and managing our water resources must become a top priority for the European Union. To make this very clear: I do not advocate new competencies for the EU to manage or even distribute national water resources, but the Union must come up with at least guidelines on how to preserve our most precious natural resource and how to avoid useless waste.

Today, agriculture uses up to 93% of all available fresh water. But in many regions of the world, including Europe, water used for irrigation is transported over the fields in open channels – with up to half of the water simply evaporating. The huge irrigation and spraying plants we can see in some parts of Europe also lose more water by evaporation than necessary. Investing in a better infrastructure here would already help a lot. Pipelines instead of open channels or irrigation systems bringing the water directly to the plants' roots are technically feasible – at a price.

And this leads inevitably to asking some uncomfortable or even disagreeable questions: does water have to be that cheap? Yes, it does, as long as we are talking about water for personal use such as drinking or washing water. In this case water is a basic human right. But does it have to be the same way for filling swimming pools or – dare I ask – irrigating fields without any respect for the amount of water that is used?

The EU must act quickly. The water framework directive can serve as a basis, but the rules currently in force do not cover all the challenges we are faced with. Fossil fuels are a finite resource. We have come to terms with this fact. Now we have to face the next challenge – it might prove to be an even more inconvenient truth.

**Marian Harkin** (Irish ALDE MEP. She is a member of the Parliament's regional development and petitions committees.

Last week the European Parliament petitions committee visited Ireland and met a number of petitioners to discuss the quality of drinking water in a number of different locations in Ireland. The petitions committee, working with the Commission, has been instrumental in ensuring greater compliance by the Irish authorities with EU legislation on clean drinking water.

As far back as 1998, a number of petitions concerning the quality of drinking water were submitted to the committee. Subsequent investigations resulted in the European Commission sending a final written warning to the Irish government in March of this year for failing to comply fully with a 2002 European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling requiring drinking water supplies to be kept free of e-coli bacteria. This just shows the power of the humble petition and indeed it is interesting to note that approximately one-third of all infringement cases in the ECJ come from the petitions committee.

When trying to quantify the problem in Ireland it is difficult to estimate how many water supplies contain e-coli bacteria. The Environmental Protection Agency in its 2005 report was extremely critical of local authorities because there was little or no monitoring of water supplies in many cases. This means we need to be cautious about figures, but a reasonably conservative estimate would be about 20% of all supplies have some level of contamination.

The Commission has also sent Ireland a similar warning for failing to comply with a 2005 ECJ ruling that requires greater controls on polluting discharges to surface water by local authorities.

Currently the Commission is investigating the issue of septic tanks. Ireland is spending significant amounts of money on upgrading waste-water treatment plants in towns and cities but the country is failing on the upgrading and the maintenance of septic tanks. Around 30% of people in Ireland live in rural areas and a very significant per-centage of that number have septic tanks. Many of them are ten, 20, even 30 years old without any upgrading or maintenance and this presents a major problem.

I fully support the right of people to live and work in rural areas but, in order for this type of development to be sustainable, significant investment by government is essential to deal with this issue. The regulations in place for new septic tanks are stringent and if followed up with regular maintenance will present no problems in the future and will help guarantee sustainable viable rural communities.

Progress has also been made on the implementation of the nitrates directive and if we were to combine this with improvements in septic tanks this could ensure that considerably less organic matter gets into the water system.

We can of course treat water to deal with excessive amounts of organic material, but just because we can does not mean that we should accept this situation as par for the course. There is always the temptation to use excess chlorine in order to achieve the desired result but this can lead to the production of trihaleomethanes which are known to be carcinogenic – a case of the cure being as bad as the disease.

The number of environmental petitions from Ireland is significant and a recent petition on the fluoridation of public water supplies has just been received. The petitioner contends that the addition of fluosilicic acid (fluoride) to drinking water in Ireland infringes two directives, the drinking water directive and the medicines directive.

The Irish government argues that the fluoridation of water is a significant factor in the reduction of tooth decay, yet the evidence furnished by the petitioner from the World Health Organisation shows that the levels of tooth decay in 'un-fluoridated' countries such as Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany, is almost identical to the levels in a 'fluoridated' Ireland. The question of whether fluoride is a medicine or not will be at issue.

So whether it is with fluoridation or chlorination, or with the presence or absence of e-coli, the petitions committee, the Commission and the Irish authorities will be very busy on water issues for the next few years. All that matters is that we get a positive outcome.