



European water resources — overview

Both water and population are unevenly distributed in Europe, and therefore countries and sub-regions experience differing degrees of water stress (see hydrologic cycle and water availability).

Water availability problems occur when the demand for water exceeds the amount available during a certain period. They occur frequently in areas with low rainfall and high population density, and in areas with intensive agricultural or industrial activity. Apart from water supply problems, overexploitation of water has led to the drying out of natural areas in western and southern Europe and salt-water intrusion in aquifers.



The overall abstraction and consumption of water resources is currently sustainable in the long-term. However, some areas may face unsustainable trends, especially in southern Europe where much improved efficiency of water use, especially in agriculture, is needed to prevent seasonal water shortages. In addition, climate change may affect water resources and water demand.

The three main users of water are agriculture, industry and the domestic sector, e.g. households.

The main policy objectives are:

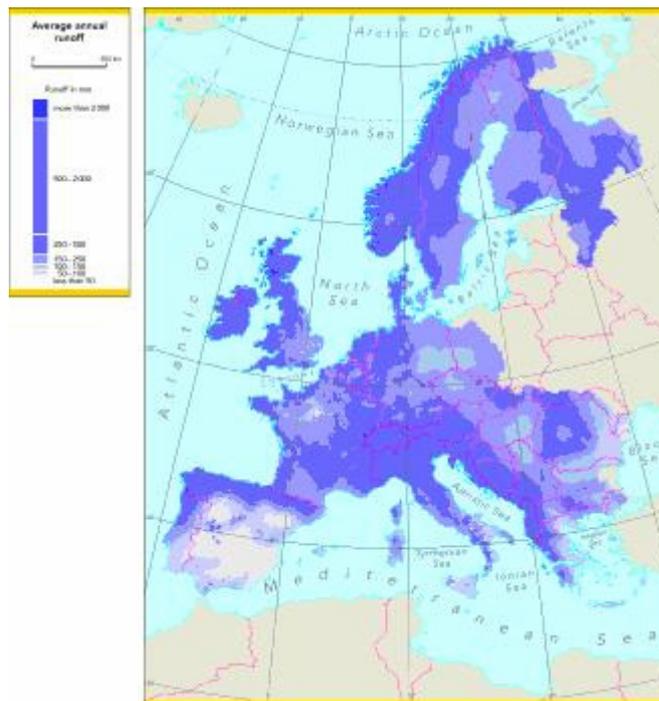
- to ensure that the rates of abstraction from our water resources are sustainable over the long term, and to promote sustainable water use based on the long-term protection of available water resources;
- to ensure a balance between abstraction and recharge of groundwater with the aim of achieving good groundwater status by 2015.



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The Water Framework Directive obliges Member States to use pricing for water-related services as an effective tool for promoting water conservation. This would also allow the environmental costs of water to be reflected in the price of water. National, regional and local authorities need, amongst other things, to introduce measures to improve the efficiency of water use and to encourage changes in the agricultural practices necessary to protect water resources and quality, such as switching to less water-demanding crops. Leakage remains a major source of inefficiency of water use and in several countries objectives have been set to achieve major reductions in leakage.



Average annual river run-off in Europe

Member States shall ensure that by 2010:

- water-pricing policies provide adequate incentives for users to use water resources efficiently, and thereby contribute to the environmental objectives of the Water Framework Directive;
- different water uses, disaggregated into at least industry, households and agriculture, shall contribute to the recovery of the costs of water services.
