

Brussels, 31 August 2007

Report reveals large water saving potential in Europe

Ahead of the Informal Environment Council in Lisbon, which will focus on water scarcity and droughts, a report published by the Commission states that water use in the European Union could be reduced by about 40%. This figure is nearly twice as much as previously estimated. In July 2007, the Commission raised a number of issues to be taken into account to ensure the availability of water for all human, economic and social activities and at the same time presented an initial set of policy options. At the heart of these policy options is the need to reduce the amount of water used in Europe and to better manage water resources available on the continent.

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "In a world plagued by increasing water scarcity and droughts we must urgently put an end to the tremendous waste of water across Europe. Water efficiency must be at the core of our policies. Enormous water savings are possible. Water saving behaviours by European citizens and industry must be actively encouraged and promoted."

Water saving potential

While Europe is by and large considered as having adequate water resources, water scarcity is an increasingly frequent phenomenon in the European Union. The long-term imbalance resulting from water demand in excess of available water resources is no longer uncommon. and as stated in the Green Paper on adaptation to climate change presented by the Commission in June 2007, the Commission expects further deterioration of the water situation in Europe if temperatures keep rising and no clear mitigation strategy is adopted.

A study commissioned by the Commission estimates that water efficiency could be improved by nearly 40% through technological improvements alone and that changes in human behaviour or production patterns could increase such savings further. In a business as usual scenario it is estimated that water consumption by the public, industry and agriculture would increase by 16% by 2030. Conversely, the use of water saving technologies and irrigation management in the industrial and agricultural sectors could reduce excesses by as much as 43% while water efficiency measures could decrease water wastage by up to a third.

In the Communication on Water Scarcity and Droughts¹ adopted in July 2007 the Commission identified an initial set of policy options to be taken at European, national and regional levels to address water scarcity within the Union. This set of proposed policies aims to move the EU towards a water-efficient and water-saving economy.

¹ COM(2007) 414 final.

At the heart of such policy options is the need to put the right price on water with the "user pays" principle becoming the rule regardless of where water is taken from. To achieve greater water savings and water efficiency, substantial changes will need to be made on how water is channelled to users and how it is used. Introducing compulsory water metering and promoting the installation of water saving devices on taps, shower heads, and toilets, for example, would greatly reduce water consumption by individual households.

On a larger scale, a proper allocation of water use between economic sectors should be considered as should the integration of water saving in all policy decisions. Effective water pricing and cost-effective measures and water sustainability and sustainable land use must also become an integral part of policy making in areas such as agriculture and tourism where all activities are adapted to the amount of water available locally.

The executive summary and the report are available at:
http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/quantity/scarcity_en.htm