

Water services' role in tackling health crises

EurEau's feedback to the Commission's call for evidence

The Union Prevention, Preparedness and Response Plan for Health Crises should recognise drinking water supply and wastewater management as fundamental components of Europe's health security architecture. Water services are essential to public health as well as a fundamental component of functioning healthcare systems. Ensuring these services are crisis-resilient is therefore indispensable for an effective and coordinated EU approach to health emergencies.

EurEau is the European water services association representing 70,000 drinking water and wastewater operators from 33 countries in Europe, from both the private and the public sectors. In light of the growing emergence of man-made and natural threats, as well as the EU and Member States efforts to ensure resilience of services that are essential for sustaining vital societal and economic functions, we welcome the Commission's intent to propose a Union Prevention, Preparedness and Response Plan for Health Crises ("the Union plan"). While the Commission's aim is to strengthen capacities and facilitate EU-wide action in tackling health crisis, we advise to take into consideration also the water services' role in this respect.

Water as a vector of and water services as a barrier to health threats

Water-borne pathogens can spread rapidly through drinking water networks, causing local or even trans-boundary outbreaks of disease. Polluted water can also facilitate the dissemination of antimicrobial-resistant (AMR) microorganisms. Conversely, adequately managed drinking water and wastewater systems act as protective barriers, interrupting disease transmission and maintaining required quality standards. Furthermore, health emergencies can be exacerbated by other crises such as energy shortages, climate-related disasters, especially floods and draughts, military or hybrid conflicts that have an impact on water services operations. Hospitals, clinics and laboratories rely on uninterrupted access to water meeting stringent microbiological and chemical standards; even short interruptions can compromise sterilisation, hygiene and patient care. Moreover, the escalating threat of hybrid warfare heightens the exposure of drinking water utilities to potential acts of sabotage, including the intentional



contamination of drinking water sources.

Understanding the risks spectrum, from source protection, treatment, distribution to wastewater collection and treatment, and thereby building-up a resilient European water services sector that is able of securing the continuity of its operations under public health emergencies as well as in face of crisis conditions with cross-sectoral impact is critical for sustaining a robust European health security framework.

Surveillance and early warning through wastewater monitoring

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the strategic value of wastewater-based epidemiology. As reported by the Commission, in the wake of the pandemic, EU recommendations on a common approach were adopted to establish a systematic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 in wastewaters whereby all EU Member States have taken rapid action with around 1,370 wastewater treatment plants being under regular surveillance across the EU.

Furthermore, the recast Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive (rUWWTD), which entered into force in 2025, enacted urban wastewater surveillance in Article 17. Member States are required to set up a governance structure that should enable coordination among authorities responsible for public health and urban wastewater management in order to carry out detection of specific viruses in urban wastewater, for early warning purposes and health emergency response measures.

Wastewater monitoring enables the early detection of pathogens, variants and AMR genes, providing cost-effective, rapid and reliable source of information before clinical cases surge. As such, targeted wastewater monitoring and coordinated results data sharing could strengthen the Union's capacity to detect and respond to emerging health threats.

Recommendations

Without imposing additional obligations or financial and administrative burdens on the water services sector, we recommend that the Commission, when preparing the Union plan, should:

- ~ Incorporate the water supply and wastewater treatment services into the Union's health crisis framework and recognise them as an essential prerequisite for effective prevention and response;
- ~ Identify drinking water provision and wastewater treatment continuity in times of health emergencies and crisis with cross-sectoral impact as critical health protection measures, and in that respect;
- ~ Ensure the necessary policy actions pertaining to the role of the water services sector in tackling health crises are complementary and aligned with existing



legislation and policy initiatives such as the Critical Entities Resilience Directive, the Union Preparedness Strategy, the EU Stockpiling Strategy, and the EU Climate Adaptation Strategy;

- ~ Take stock of the surveillance of wastewater as means of early warning and response to health emergencies, and to that end;
- ~ Recall the Member States obligations under Article 17 rUWWTD, and assess possible policy tools to ensure harmonised approaches in surveillance of pathogens in wastewater, drawing from experience during COVID-19 pandemic and Recommendation (EU) 2021/472;
- ~ Embed water services sector representatives in EU and national health preparedness structures to improve situational awareness and decision-making during crises.



About EurEau

EurEau is the voice of Europe's water sector. We represent 70,000 drinking water and wastewater operators from 33 countries in Europe, from both the private and the public sectors.

Our members are 38 national associations of water services. At EurEau, we bring national water professionals together to agree European water sector positions regarding the management of water quality, resource efficiency and access to water for Europe's citizens and businesses. The EurEau secretariat is based in Brussels.



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