



## PRESS INFORMATION

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### **Unwanted bathers: pathogenic bacteria and germs**

**Revision of the European Bathing Water Directive (76/160/EEC)**

**Munich/Hennef, 13 May 2002 - The official bathing season will start these days in a lot of European countries; in southern Europe the bathing business is already in full swing. The pleasures of bathing might however be spoiled: Apart from mainly aesthetic nuisances like algae bloom bathers might encounter health problems as gastro-intestinal diseases, skin irritation and ear or eye diseases, caused mostly by microbiological pollution.**

Especially small children, elderly people and sensitive persons are at risk. To avoid this danger the European Community developed in the late seventies a directive that prescribes limit values for certain parameters in designated bathing areas. After more than 25 years this directive is now under revision to adapt it to the newest findings from medicine, engineering and water management. The European Water Association, the European association for the national professional water association, is actively involved in the revision of this important directive.



## **Need for adaptation in spite of significant successes**

The existing directive has led to significant improvements of the bathing water quality. Alone from 1992 to 1999 the number of bathing places complying at least to the imperative limit values rose from 72% to 96%. Experience showed however that certain parameters are insufficient; in addition the information given to the bathers about the water quality is from the previous bathing season and thus outdated. Additionally it became visible that different sampling methods were used in the Member States, so that the results cannot be compared on a European scale. All these and other problems shall be tackled in the new version of the directive, to which the European Commission started an intensive expert discussion in 2000.

## **Demands from European water and health experts**

This was the reason for the European Water Association - after a first basic comment in 2000 - to arrange an expert workshop. The workshop took place in January 2002 with about 40 European water and health experts. Unanimously the experts recognised the successes obtained so far and welcomed a revision. At the same time they made various suggestions for the contents of a revised Bathing Water Directive.

## **Concentrate activities to enable maximum protection of the population**

Although the existing directive deals with bathing there is no definition of "bathing" so far. Health risks are not limited to bathing in terms of swimming, as they are mainly caused by swallowing microbiologically polluted water during head immersion. This risk can also occur during other water re-



lated activities like surfing and water ski; health risks can therefore not be excluded for these activities. A new definition is planned to take this into account. The EWA criticises however that the definitions presented so far are definitely too broad: The imprecise wording could involve all activities in, on and around waters - including angling and high sea fishing. This would lead to a substantial extension of both the bathing season and the bathing waters to be designated and monitored. The result would be additional cost loads for the monitoring public authorities and the operators of wastewater treatment plants that discharge into the related waters - costs that would be disproportionate to the achieved health benefits.

### **Strengthen the bathers' autonomy by improving information**

"If the goal is a maximum protection of the population's health we need to concentrate our efforts on the designated places, where most of the bathers are found", requested therefore Dr.-Ing. Sigurd van Riesen, Secretary General of the European Water Association, at IFAT 2002 in Munich, Germany. "Only here disinfection systems should have to be installed at the wastewater treatment plants." Further risks for water sportsmen and bathers at unofficial and lowly visited sites should be left at the discretion of the autonomous users by informing them basically about potential health risks and letting them decide on their own whether they want to take the risk.



## **Strengthen water management principles**

The existing directive and its national implementations are focussed on the compliance with the limit values. Are those exceeded, the beach or the bathing place are considered to fail compliance. "If the water of a beach is microbiologically polluted and the beach is closed in due time, the population is not at risk - such a beach should in future be considered to be in compliance with the directive," Dr. van Riesen made clear. Such a risk management is in accordance with the ideas of the European Commission: One of the focal points of the future Bathing Water Directive outlined by the Commission is the aim to manage the bathing waters instead of only surveying them.

## **Input to the European Commission**

The work of the EWA workshop in January 2002 resulted in a report that was sent by the EWA to the European Commission and brought into the last official meeting of the bathing water experts at the Commission. Several smaller task groups were set up at the workshop that will continue and deepen the work on certain special subjects. The European Water Association will thus continue contributing to the revision of the European Bathing Water Directive and bring in sound expert knowledge.

The detailed workshop report is available upon request from the European Water Association, Ms Kirsten Overmann, phone: +49 2242 872 189, email: [overmann@atv.de](mailto:overmann@atv.de), and can also be found on the Association's homepage (<http://www.EWAonline.de>)

# European Water Association



The European Water Association (EWA) is an independent non-governmental and non-profit making organisation dealing with the management and improvement of the water environment. It is one of the major professional associations in Europe that covers the whole water sector, wastewater as well as drinking water and water related waste, providing best practice and best science. With member associations from nearly all Central and Eastern European Countries, it not only includes most of the current European Union member states, Norway, and Switzerland, but also most of the Candidate Countries and Russia.

Besides the information of its members on EU legislation and standardisation, the aim of the association is to provide a forum for the discussion of key technical and policy issues. This is done by international conferences, workshops and meetings, special working groups for experts and also publications. Through this exchange of knowledge the association intends to contribute to a sustainable water management: a safe water supply and the protection of water and soil.

The EWA has established close contacts to the European Commission (DG Environment), the European Committee for Standardization (CEN), the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Parliament.

The EWA consists today of nearly 30 European national associations representing professionals and technicians for wastewater and water utilities as well as consultants, and firms and enterprises as corporate members. The association thus represents about 55,000 professional individuals working in their national associations in a broad field of water management.