European Water Resilience Strategy

Guide to Member Associations on actions at the national, regional and local levels

22 July 2025

1. Why have we produced this guide?

The European Commission published on 04 June the European Water Resilience Strategy along with a Recommendation on Water Efficiency (& accompanying annex).

- **The European Water Resilience Strategy**: in the form of a communication, which although non-binding, provides for a comprehensive framework for Member States to act, along with actions from the EU itself. The European Water Resilience strategy has the following 3 objectives:
  - Restoring and protecting the water cycle;
  - Building a water-smart, competitive economy;
  - Ensuring access to clean and affordable water for all.
- **Commission Recommendation on water resilience** & accompanying **Annex**: recommendations are also non-binding, and "recommend" actions to Member States. That is because water is mostly managed at a local and/or regional level. A few key elements include:
  - Introduces the "water efficiency first" principle, urging Member States to prioritise reducing water demand and improve efficiency before considering supply-side measures like new reservoirs or desalination.
  - Encourages setting national water efficiency targets based on local conditions, supported by smart technologies like digital water metering and leak detection.
  - Links water resilience to the EU's strategic autonomy, climate preparedness, and competitiveness while emphasising its relevance to sectors such as agriculture, energy, and industry.

However, it appears that the delivery of water resilience will happen primarily at Member State, regional and local levels, supported by EU legislation, funding, tools and collaborative initiatives.

This document aims at assisting EFCA's national member associations to:

- engage proactively with national and regional authorities,
- guide local clients and stakeholders, and
- prepare to participate in EU-supported programmes.

2. Core principles for local, regional and national action stemming from the European Water Resilience Strategy

- Respect for national circumstances, coupled with alignment at EU level
  - The Strategy respects the different national ways of organising water supply and management. That includes understanding of the different ownership models of

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water as a resource across Member States. At the same time, it sets clear expectations under the EU acquis (Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, Nitrates Directive, Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, Drinking Water Directive, CAP regulation).

- Emphasis on local realities
    - Water availability and the circumstances of various sectors (agriculture, industry, drinking water) differ greatly across Member States and regions. Actions must be adapted according to the different territories, based on local needs for water and climate vulnerability.
- Water efficiency first
    - Member States are encouraged to apply the principle of water efficiency first in all measures that affect water management. Allocation systems should be transparent, fair, secure and predictable, with clear priority rules in case of scarcity, always safeguarding access for vulnerable groups.

3. Key areas for action at Member State, regional and local level

a) Governance, planning and implementation

Member States and regions are responsible for implementing the Water Framework and Floods Directives, updating River Basin Management Plans and Flood Risk Management Plans.

The Commission will step up enforcement and conduct Structured Dialogues (2025-2026) with national authorities to establish implementation priorities with regards to the Water Framework Directive and Floods Directive.

The Commission recommends that Member States:

- Develop transparent water allocation schemes, defining who/what is prioritised during scarcity.
- Integrate climate vulnerability assessments into plans, including under the Nature Restoration Regulation by 2026.

b) Water supply and management, abstractions[1] and smart data

The Commission observes that many Member States lack accurate data on water availability. To that end, relevant authorities at Member State level must:

- Conduct up-to-date assessments of water supply and management, abstractions, losses and returns.
- Register and strictly control water abstractions, including with adaptable permitting procedures.

[1] Water abstractions are the process of taking water from a natural source (such as rivers, lakes, aquifers, or reservoirs) for human use. This water might be used for drinking water supply, irrigation (agriculture), industrial processes, cooling (e.g., in power plants), domestic use etc.

- Deploy smart water metering across sectors, helping both citizens and businesses manage use and enabling rigorous monitoring.

c) Leakage reduction

As leakage rates vary from 8% to 57% across EU Member States, under the Drinking Water Directive, Member States must:

- Reduce leakages, and if above the new EU threshold (to be set by 2028), adopt national action plans by 2030.

d) Addressing nutrient pollution

Nitrate pollution from agriculture and urban wastewater is considered by the Commission to be a massive cost to health and ecosystems. Member States must accelerate implementation of the Nitrates Directive, and will receive:

- An Assistance Toolbox from the Commission (2026-2027) with modelling, interactive maps, best practices.
- (Support to build manure storage facilities and to promote nutrient circularity.)

e) Agriculture and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) strategic plans

National CAP Strategic Plans support, among others, precision farming, drip irrigation, water reuse, soil and landscape measures that boost water retention and organic farming to reduce pesticide/fertiliser pressures.
Member States are urged:

- to make maximum use of CAP funds for water resilience,
- and to prepare to further incentivise farmers to improve the environmental and climate performance of their holdings, including towards better water management in the next CAP programming period.

f) Water reuse

Member States have highly variable reuse levels (0-80%) of wastewater. The Commission will:

- Provide guidance and capacity building under the Water Reuse Regulation,
- Prepare a review by 2028 which may expand reuse obligations (EU level action).

g) Spatial and urban planning

The Commission will support Member States in using enhanced visualisation tools combining water, energy and environmental data to guide spatial planning decisions. Member States and cities are encouraged to:

- Develop “sponge cities”, stormwater harvesting and natural water retention,
- Integrate water resilience into local masterplans.

h) Cooperation and knowledge sharing

The Commission will foster cooperation between river basin and sea basin organisations, regions and cities through initiatives like:

- Interreg, Horizon Europe, Urban Agenda (for example 'Water Sensitive City'), Cohesion for Transitions Community.

Ⓟ EFCA Member Associations can help local authorities join or lead such initiatives.

4. Funding and investment opportunities

Member States are invited to rapidly deploy EU funds for water resilience, including:

- Cohesion policy (with new flexibilities: up to 100% EU co-financing and 30% prefinancing for dedicated water priorities). However, as this is a decision at national government level, MAs may have to apply pressure so that this is achieved in practice.
- BlueInvest for blue sector technologies.
- Ramp up water related investments under the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP).
- LIFE, Horizon Europe, and other programmes.

The Commission will prepare guidance for "plug and play" pilot projects to reduce leakages, deploy digital metering, and improve water efficiency, simpler than large-scale water projects.

5. Digital tools

Member States will be able to use advanced digital tools developed by the Commission, such as:

- the Digital Twin of the Ocean, and
- Destination Earth models to assess long-term water conditions under climate change. These will be available to national and local authorities before 2030.

6. Recommended supporting actions for EFCA member associations

Engage with national and regional governments to:

- Ensure transparent water allocation schemes are put in place.
- Push for robust leakage reduction plans, including maintenance and repair of ageing, leaking water supply infrastructure and blocked and hazardous wastewater infrastructure.
- Promote use of digital tools to enhance water efficiency.
- Advocate for quality-based procurement at national level to ensure water investments (funded by EU or national programmes) favour high quality, innovation and sustainability, not just lowest price.

Help clients prepare:

- For the use of new smart metering and other digital tools.
- For stricter water abstraction controls and adaptable permitting.
- For possible upcoming expansion of water reuse rules.

Local skills development

- Promote workforce training and local engineering capacity, as recommended for Member States in the Strategy.

Support local awareness-raising:

- The Commission recommends that Member States run regular campaigns to raise awareness of water efficiency first. EFCA associations can help by offering speakers, tools or engineering success stories (an example for the latter – Future Leaders Competition, Digital & New Technologies Winner's project).

Summary of direct recommendations to Member States (from Strategy and Recommendation)
• Apply water efficiency first, based on reliable water supply and management and climate scenarios. • Develop transparent, secure, inclusive allocation systems with drought priorities. • Invest in human skills and governance capacity at national, regional and local levels. • Enforce controls on abstractions, use adaptable permits, and strong pollution prevention. • Maximise CAP, Cohesion Policy (but also EU) funds for nature-based solutions, irrigation efficiency, leakage reduction and reuse. • Regularly raise awareness among citizens, businesses and municipalities.

7. Suggested next steps for EFCA associations

- Map current national plans (River Basin Management Plans, Flood Risk Management Plans, Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plans) to identify gaps and opportunities.
- Organise workshops with ministries, water authorities and municipalities to explain how engineers can help deliver leakage reduction, reuse, smart metering and sponge city initiatives. This will also serve as a way to establish relevant links with key people at various governance levels.
- Collect examples of best practice from your members to share with other countries under EU peer cooperation programmes.

8. Conclusion

By mobilising expertise and relationships, EFCA Member Associations can play an important role in localising the relevant aspects of the EU Water Resilience Strategy. Through informed action, partnerships, and capacity building, associations can ensure that Europe's water resilience agenda is implemented effectively and equitably across its diverse regions and territories.

At the same time, throughout the months and years that the above mentioned actions are to take place, Member Associations will also have the possibility to identify gaps or actions that can/should take place at the European level. Consequently, EFCA can be better informed as to how to advocate for your interests at the European level at a later stage.