



European Parliament Forum on Recreational Fisheries and Aquatic Environment

REPORT

Biodiversity and hydropower: a Green Deal for migratory fish?

Co-chaired by MEP Carmen Avram and MEP Michal Wiezik

28 October 2020

11:00 – 13:00

Videoconference

Introduction

MEP Niclas Herbst (Germany, EPP), Chair of the RecFishing Forum, welcomed the participants to the fourth event of the Forum since its relaunch after the European elections, and the first one dedicated to freshwater. He referred to the situation in **Germany, which is ranked amongst the bottom-third of performers in the European Union when it comes to protecting its freshwater ecology**: the number of insect species, amphibians and even mammals has fallen drastically in recent years. He called for actions to reverse the loss of biodiversity, including in European rivers, because the protection of the environment is important for the future, but also today for communities that depend on healthy rivers.

MEP Michal Wiezik (Slovakia, EPP) stated that the World Fish Migration Day (24 October) was a reminder to all that fish migration is not a given and is even crucial for fish life cycle. He took the example of sturgeon, one of the most endangered species in the world. He recalled that the **fragmentation of rivers is identified as one of the main factors for such a situation, with one million barriers on European rivers**, including 10% deemed obsolete.¹ Hydropower plants are part of these barriers. However, Mr Wiezik acknowledged that hydropower is of importance in the sustainable transition on which Europe is working. At the same time, the European Commission announced its Biodiversity Strategy, which includes a **clear objective of restoring 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers**. The Council of the EU recently endorsed such objective, stressing “the need to step up action on the restoration of rivers, wetlands and floodplains, in line with the objectives of the Water Framework Directive.” Exemplifying this necessary balance between energy objectives, sustainable transition, including through hydropower, and biodiversity restoration, he referred to a decision of the Slovak Supreme Court to withdraw a permit for a small hydropower plant, which would not provide sufficient energy compared to the biodiversity loss it would lead to.

“Energy production does not always represent an overriding public interest. A careful assessment is necessary to avoid irreversible biodiversity loss.”

MEP Michal Wiezik

¹ AMBER, “Over one million barriers: new research calls for urgent actions to reconnect Europe’s rivers”, 29 June 2020: <https://amber.international/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ENGLISH.pdf>



“A single action will not get us to shore: we need a coordination across all sectors.”

MEP Carmen Avram

MEP Carmen Avram (Romania, S&D) shared with participants that, when she was a journalist, she produced a documentary on sturgeon, uncovering a disaster in terms of biodiversity loss and stressing the need for actions to reverse it. She further quoted **the recent study of the European Environment Agency, which found that hydropower installations and illegal fishing had the biggest impact on migratory fish species.**² Against this background, she referred to the role of the European Commission and its Biodiversity Strategy. She highlighted a number of open questions towards the achievement of the 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers objective: **the effort distribution amongst Member States, the selection criteria for river arms and the challenge of taking into account the energy mix.** While she recognised that hydropower could release pressure from coal, she insisted that Member States needed to take into account biodiversity when setting their energy mix. She took the example of some projects that financed the creation of new migratory routes, around hydropower installations. She concluded her opening statement by highlighting the **underlying conflict: there is a need to both protect the environment and mitigate the effects of climate change. This means developing hydropower to reach the decarbonisation targets but with careful consideration for the impact on the environment.** She hoped that the Commission would listen to Member States in establishing tailored-made national plans, as the energy mix is different depending on the geographical location.

Roundtable chaired by MEP Michal Wiezik

Mark Owen (Head of Freshwater, Angling Trust) started by referring to the European Anglers Alliance [position paper](#) on hydropower, as well as the Living Rivers Europe [manifesto](#) on the same topic. According to him, meetings and events he attended over the last ten years hosted by the Commission, all concluded that hydropower damages the aquatic environment and cannot be compliant with the Water Framework Directive (WFD) objectives. There are however 8,000 new hydropower plants planned in the coming years, including 20% in protected areas. That is why European rivers are still not in good ecological status, notably due to the hydro-morphological pressures. He warned that **this further endangers the resilience to climate change and the capacity to sustain wildlife.** On public awareness, he argued that, contrary to what politicians and civil servants seem to think or sometimes pretend, the public does understand the WFD and what is at stake. This was proved, for example, by the [largely relayed Living Rivers Europe petition, signed by more than 375,000 citizens](#), about the importance to find the WFD fit for purpose. He added that **the COVID-19 crisis has pushed a lot of people towards angling, making them more aware on issues regarding the freshwater environment.** Against this background, he believed that citizens would demand even more actions from governments and the EU to improve the quality of the aquatic environment.

Herman Wannigen (Founder, World Fish Migration Foundation) introduced the [Dam Removal Europe](#) initiative, which aims at saving free-flowing rivers in Europe. It is estimated that there are in Europe 100,000 obsolete sites that could be easily removed. In addition, 25,000 hydropower plants

² European Environment Agency, *State of nature in the EU: Results from reporting under the nature directives 2013-2018*”, 19 October 2020.



need to be relicensed, and he claimed that **it would be cheaper to remove some of them rather than retrofitting them**. He further clarified that Dam Removal Europe is not an activist group but rather a 'positive group' which only wants to **remove all abandoned, obsolete, unsafe or inefficient dams**. Statistics actually showed that after removals, freshwater species are coming back by millions, feeding the river itself but also restoring the whole system. He concluded by stating that the initiative aims at connecting all European countries, to share the tools on how dams can be removed, as well as at catalysing funding and crowdfunding solutions.

“Unfortunately, WFD exemptions have become the norm, instead of exceptions.”

Sergiy Moroz (EEB)

Sergiy Moroz (Policy Manager for Water and Biodiversity, European Environmental Bureau) started his intervention by recalling that the WFD had undergone a serious impact assessment and was found fit for purpose by the European Commission. He also reminded the audience that **the evaluation found that the main reasons for the failure to achieve the WFD objectives: insufficient funding and slow implementation by Member States**. He added that insufficient

integration with the other sectoral policies created some contradictions and uncertainties. He then presented the latest European Environment Agency's report, which showed that a large number of ecosystems and habitats are not in good conservation status, calling for actions to tackle pressures weighting on these. He said that a lot can be done to adapt and make existing hydropower plants compatible with the WFD objectives. He even set forth some research that showed that **it is possible to achieve climate neutrality and ambitious climate goal, without reliance on new hydropower capacity**.³ He too referred to the Living Rivers Europe manifesto, asking to stop EU funding to new hydropower installations, including funding from the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The manifesto calls instead to **reallocate this money to the refurbishment of existing hydropower plants and dam removal projects**. He concluded by mentioning the European Parliament Motion for Resolution on the implementation of water legislation, asking MEPs to strengthen the resolution with provisions for better funding, better integration, better use of the WFD instruments, better cost recovery, and better use of exemptions.

Reactions from MEPs and debate with the audience, moderated by MEP Michal Wiezik

Fred Bloot (European Anglers Alliance) questioned the true public awareness on the topic and asked what the European Parliament could do to increase it. **Herman Wanningen (WFMF)** added that it is important for awareness raising activities to be an integral part of any new projects, such as the LIFE or H2020 projects, so that the information comes from multiple organisations at the same time. **MEP Michal Wiezik (Slovakia, EPP)** further mentioned MEPs' awareness, as he believed that most MEPs were not aware of the facts highlighted at the occasion of this event. He called for a public movement to raise the many missing environmental issues to the top of the political agenda. For **MEP Carmen Avram (Romania, S&D)**, the Commission needed to start awareness raising campaigns, deemed crucial for citizens to understand all the intricacies of such topics.

“Without more awareness amongst decision-makers, we cannot expect many improvements.”

MEP Michal Wiezik

³ Paris Agreement Compatible Scenarios for Energy Infrastructure, *Building a Paris Agreement Compatible (PAC) energy scenario*, June 2020: https://www.pac-scenarios.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PAC_scenario_technical_summary_29jun20.pdf



MEP Michal Wiezik (Slovakia, EPP) asked a question about the financing and costs of removing dams in Europe, as well as the room for improvement for such a movement. **Herman Wanningen (WFMF)** clarified that the cost and time dedicated depend on each project. It ranges from €5,000 to €20 million and it is sometimes possible to remove a dam in a few hours. He insisted on the importance of identifying the projects that can have the biggest impact on river restoration and the aquatic environment. **For example, a project in Estonia costed around €15 million, but allowed to restore 3,000 km of free-flowing rivers.** A lot of smaller dams can be easily and cheaply removed, and have a big impact on rivers ecosystems too. On financing, he said that the EU, national governments but also philanthropic organisations help fund such projects.

Olivier Portrat (European Fishing Tackle Trade Association) referred to other ways than dam removal to contribute to helping the aquatic environment, mentioning the now abandoned project of stocking programme for sturgeon in Romania. **MEP Carmen Avram (Romania, S&D)** said that she was personally trying to revive the programme, that will be beneficial for sturgeon.

Roundtable chaired by MEP Carmen Avram

Joakim Kruse (Water Management Director, Bothnian Sea Water District Authority) presented the new Swedish legislation in place since January 2019, which **requires mandatory reconsideration of all hydropower permits, so that they comply with the WFD objectives** (as laid out in the [ECJ Weser ruling](#)). He added that a national plan for hydropower has been adopted in June 2020, laying out a 20-year river basin-based plan for reconsideration of permits, including guidance on balancing the environmental and energy objectives. He further clarified that the plan aimed for minimum impact on energy production, as hydropower is deemed essential for Sweden's energy balance. However, to make those compatible with the WFD objectives, he said that the **focus would be on adapting active plants to, as far as possible, achieve good ecological status of rivers – even though dam removals cannot be entirely ruled out and may be considered in some cases.** He concluded by presenting some of the challenges faced by the administration, most notably the division between the North and South of the country. Hydropower in the North is dominated by large scale plants and the South generally have small scale plants. That is why he thought that there will be challenges in the assessment and distribution of appropriate measures for plants and river basins in different parts of Sweden, in terms of impact on energy supply, cultural and environmental issues.

Bettina Doeser (Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Environment, Dir.C.1. Clean Water) welcomed the event, on the heels of the European Green Week, to help building a whole community on the topic. On the 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers objective, she said that **the Commission is preparing to help, support and provide guidance to Member States, notably on which obstacles to prioritise by carrying out cost-benefit analyses.** Referring back to the Dam Removal Europe project in Estonia, she underlined the many benefits stemming from such a small project: creation of jobs restoration work and recreational, environmental and social benefits. On financing, she mentioned that **opportunities were available under the new Recovery and Resilience Facility Fund as well as the next Multiannual Financial Framework, including for obsolete dam removals.** She took the example of the Iron Gate (Romania), where an Interreg project was partly funded by the European Commission to help find a way for sturgeon to get around the hydropower plant. The project included



an important communication component to help raise awareness. She then added that the EU taxonomy for sustainable activities was also an important tool to help streamlining investments towards sustainability, and that water was one of the six key objectives the Regulation tries to address.

Reactions from MEPs and debate with the audience, moderated by MEP Carmen Avram

MEP Carmen Avram (Romania, S&D) echoed the two presentations by calling for a **proper financial allocation, better coordination across different sectors, better implementation of current legislations and awareness raising campaigns**, to help the public understand these issues.

Claire Baffert (WWF EPO) asked the Commission how the current financial support to new hydropower plants is coherent with the implementation of the Biodiversity Strategy, and whether the Environment Directorate-General was willing to cooperate with other DGs and institutions to take money away from new hydropower plants construction and redirect it to refurbishment. **Bettina Doeser (DG ENV)** responded that **generally, refurbishment of existing dams is a much better solution than building news dams** and added that DG ENV is engaging with everybody on the topic.

Stephan Spahn (DAFV) pointed out to the lack of commitments of the German government and its failure to implement the WFD, raising concerns that the 2027 targets would not be reached. **Bettina Doeser (DG ENV)** responded that the Commission made several recommendations to Germany after analysing its second river basin management plan. She added that Member States had now access to an important amount of funds and that **if they were to use them to the most, then there would be a chance to really improve the situation of water bodies in the coming years.**

Jan Kappel (European Anglers Alliance) referred to a Swedish ruling which said that all fish need space to migrate and asked how important this ruling was in relation to the Swedish national plan.⁴ **Joakim Kruse (Bothnian Sea Water District Authority)** admitted that the ruling would indeed have an effect on all upcoming permit reconsiderations, but that it could not be taken as a blanket statement: it will depend on the impact on the energy supply system. He added that the Court also said that the authorities would have to look at both the *potential* and *actual* migration routes.

Conclusions

MEP Carmen Avram (Romania, S&D) concluded by thanking all participants for a very interesting exchange of views, admitting that the event broadened her list of questions to the Commission and Member States. She added that everyone had to be mindful of the necessary balance between the EU Biodiversity Strategy and the need to fulfil the energy needs in Europe with low carbon solutions.

“We will have to hold the Commission accountable in its roll-out of the Biodiversity Strategy.”

MEP Carmen Avram

⁴ Svea Hovtätt, “Question about conditions regarding fishing roads etc. for legal declaration and permits for conversion and operation of hydropower plants” Case Nr. 9888-12: <https://www.domstol.se/mark--och-miljooverdomstolen/mark--och-miljooverdomstolens-avgoranden/2014/73231/>



MEP Michal Wiezik (Slovakia, EPP) recognised that rivers can be very useful, notably in the context of COVID-19, to give people a feeling of nature, mentioning the pristine river in Slovakia he usually strolls along. He concluded that Europe needs both natural rivers and rivers producing electricity, deploring however the construction of new dams on the last untouched rivers.

At the end of the meeting, participants were invited to propose **a word to sum up their takeaways from the meeting**. This is the result:

