
Historical Breakthrough at Rhine Ministerial Conference

Rhine Ministers decide in Amsterdam to effectively reduce Micropollutants from Households, Industry and Agriculture

Karlsruhe, 26 February 2020. Micropollutants from municipal wastewater (sewage treatment plants), industry and agriculture are to be effectively contained from now on. This was decided by the responsible ministers of the 8 Rhine riparian states as well as the EU Commissioner for the Environment at the 16th International Conference of Rhine Ministers after a long struggle in the run-up. The decision is a milestone in the process of reducing and preventing micropollutants, which was initiated in 2007 at the 14th Rhine Ministerial Conference in Bonn.

According to the new "Rhine 2040" programme, micropollutants are to be reduced by at least 30% overall by 2040. An evaluation system for the reduction is to be developed by 2021. Based on this evaluation system, after 6 years a review will take place and, if necessary, the reduction objective will be increased. The overall objective should continue to be drinking water from the simplest possible, natural treatment processes - instead of highly technical treatment in the waterworks.

The reduction objective of at least 30 % goes hand in hand with the "European Green Deal" and the "Zero Pollution Ambition" of the EU Commission as well as Art. 7.3 of the EU Water Framework Directive to reduce water treatment. As a first step, the recommendations of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine ICPR for the reduction of micropollutants of February 2019 are now to be concretised and implemented in the new "Rhine 2040" programme. For this, the IAWR has already presented a 12-Point Catalogue of Identified Measures.

From the IAWR's point of view, coherence of EU policy with the reduction objective is now required. This applies in particular to the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which is still to be defined in 2020. In the area of agricultural policy, the Rhine Ministerial Conference is promoting organic farming in particular - also to counteract nitrogen pollution. Besides, the EU pharmaceutical strategy and the REACH Regulation on the registration of chemicals, which is to be revised shortly, must also make their contribution to the reduction objective. Coherence is also required in the negotiations that have been initiated for the EU economic and trade agreements with Great Britain and the USA. For these agreements, the EU-Canada trade agreement CETA would be insufficient as a blueprint, particularly due to the lack of application of the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle must not be weakened in any way.

IAWR President Prof. Dr. Matthias Maier explicitly praised the success of the conference and welcomed the breakthrough to reduce micropollutants. In his speech at the Ministerial Conference in Amsterdam, he pointed out that "we have enough warning signals to which we must now respond. The IAWR points out that in the past there have been a number of substances that have threatened our drinking water resources, that had not been detected in routine monitoring programmes and that have repeatedly led to shut-downs of waterworks. Now, strengthening the precautionary principle at the source of pollution is required.

From the IAWR's point of view, the success of the Amsterdam Conference impressively demonstrates that the states at the heart of Europe are capable of cooperating on fundamental decisions and can take a pioneering position. The success is also of particular importance because international cooperation in the Rhine basin has for decades been regarded as a model for other river basins in Europe and the world. Climate change brings with it imbalances in the water cycle and can only be contained through international cooperation.

Further information: <https://en.iawr.org/news/>

The International Association of Waterworks in the Rhine Basin (IAWR) is the association of the drinking water supplier associations AWBR, ARW and RIWA in the upper, middle and lower Rhine river basin with 61 million people depend on clean drinking water. Currently, the IAWR office is located at Stadtwerke Karlsruhe.

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