

Cefic views on the revision of the Water Framework Directive

Cefic supports a targeted, practical revision of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) that maintains high water-quality ambitions whilst strengthening Europe's resilience and investment certainty. To make the framework workable and predictable, the revision should: (1) broaden its scope beyond critical raw materials, (2) modernise chemical status assessment and reassess how the non-deterioration and one-out-all-out principles interact in permitting, (3) ensure EU-wide harmonised monitoring methods, (4) carefully assess the feasibility and enforceability of any Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) approach for water, (5) fully reflect industry's self-treatment costs when applying Article 9 cost recovery, and (6) guarantee transparent, science-based standard-setting with meaningful stakeholder involvement, including through ECHA.

Extension of the scope of the revision

What is the issue?

The proposed revision is currently limited to removing regulatory bottlenecks and simplifying the WFD only in relation to critical raw materials.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

Strengthening EU raw material security was a key ask of the Antwerp Declaration, but the WFD affects far more than raw materials. For the chemical industry, the WFD is part of a wider legal framework that must deliver environmental objectives while providing predictable, timely, and stable permitting conditions that enable long-term investment planning.

What do we need?

Broaden the scope of the revision beyond critical raw materials, to support EU resilience efforts (including work under the Critical Chemicals Alliance) without weakening overall water-quality ambitions, and to improve the predictability and practicability of permitting across the chemicals value chain.

Revision of the chemical status assessment and evaluation of the combination of the non-deterioration and the one-out-all-out principles

What is the issue?

Under the current approach, a water body is classified as having "good chemical status" only if all monitored priority substances meet their Environmental Quality Standards (EQS). Because of the "one-out-all-out" (OOAO) principle, a single exceedance leads to a "not good chemical status"

classification. Member States use this classification - together with other factors - to set measures in River Basin Management Plans and to guide proportionate pollution reduction.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

Member States are responsible for assessing the chemical status of their water bodies and will consider it when granting or reviewing permits, notably under the Industrial Emissions Directive (IED). New or revised EQS will affect permits even where an installation's contribution to the water-body is marginal, because compliance is assessed at water-body level, rather than controls implemented at a source level.

While the WFD appropriately focuses only on water quality, permitting decisions must reflect the overall environmental performance of an installation (including emissions to air and soil, energy use, water use, and waste). Any required mitigation measures should remain proportionate to the actual contribution and avoid unintended cross-media trade-offs that undermine overall environmental improvement.

What do we need?

- Modernise the chemical-status assessment by introducing additional categories between “good” and “not good”, and assess ecological status in parallel, to support more nuanced, risk-based decision-making.
- Clarify how the non-deterioration and OAO principles are to be interpreted in the context of permitting, including how to account for cross-media benefits. For example, a new technology may slightly increase the concentration of a pollutant while significantly reducing energy use, air and soil emissions, or waste generation. Under the current combined approach, such a project may be refused, locking in sub-optimal technologies and hampering overall environmental progress.
- Broaden and streamline the use of derogations under Article 4.7, which are currently limited in scope (e.g., short-term projects and the relocation of water and sediments), taking into account:
 - local circumstances, including background levels for specific quality elements, whether originating from diffuse sources or not;
 - cross-media effects (e.g., impacts on air and soil emissions, energy consumption, water use, and waste generation);
 - technical feasibility;
 - specific treatment for water-saving projects (which may increase concentrations by reducing water volume, without increasing the original pollutant load).
- Encourage River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) to enable holistic, water-body-level decision-making - covering all operators in a catchment, not only the chemical industry - so authorities determine the most effective mix of measures to achieve environmental objectives, addressing both diffuse and point sources.

Availability of monitoring methodologies – standardised analytical methods

What is the issue?

Analytical methods used to assess compliance with EQS display variability, and standardised methods are not available for all EQS. As the list of substances expands, laboratory capacity and turnaround times may also become constraining factors.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

The use of non-harmonised sampling and measurement techniques undermines comparability of results and creates an uneven level playing field across EU Member States.

What do we need?

Ensure EU-wide availability and use of standardised sampling and analytical methods for EQS compliance, to eliminate variability driven by non-harmonised techniques.

Make the availability and performance of analytical methods a prerequisite for new binding standards: the chosen method - including detection/quantification limits and measurement uncertainty - must be known and fit for purpose for any binding limit value to be implementable and enforceable. The Watch List and substance prioritisation process should therefore confirm that suitable methods exist before inclusion in the directive, and any new EQS should be introduced together with defined, standardised analytical methods.

Feasibility study on Extended Producer Responsibility

What is the issue?

The European Commission will carry out a feasibility study on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to support the monitoring of substances in water. Existing EPR schemes typically address waste streams from a single, clearly identifiable source. By contrast, water pollution often stems from multiple diffuse sources, can be transported across borders, and may involve substances that transform in the aquatic environment, making robust source attribution particularly challenging.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

EPR could have significant cost and competitiveness implications across the chemical industry's value chain and may affect downstream users and consumers depending on how responsibilities and fees are allocated.

What do we need?

Ensure that any potential EPR approach for water is workable, proportionate, and enforceable. The feasibility study should clarify scope, roles and responsibilities along the value chain, proportionality, practical implementation, data and traceability requirements, and enforcement mechanisms for any potential EPR approach under EU water policy. It should also be considered that a targeted pollutant may not be clearly linked to an identifiable source.

Consideration of internal industrial self-treatment costs in the application of the cost recovery principle (Article 9 WFD)

What is the issue?

Article 9 of the WFD requires an equitable application of the cost-recovery principle based on sound economic analysis. However, the costs directly borne by industrial operators for on-site self-treatment or pre-treatment of wastewater are not explicitly reflected in the current methodology.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

Chemical companies have invested substantially in self-treatment and pre-treatment to reduce pollutant loads before discharge to the environment or to municipal systems.

What do we need?

Fully account for industry's internal self-treatment and pre-treatment costs in Article 9 cost-recovery assessments, as these investment and operating costs can constitute genuine sanitation costs. Otherwise, the analysis remains incomplete and distorted, underestimates the financial effort already made by industry, and risks imposing a double economic burden. Integrating these costs is essential for a proportionate, objective, and legally robust application of Article 9.

Considerations on collaboration with ECHA and on methodologies used to derive new Standards

What is the issue?

ECHA began supporting EU water-related legislation with the revised Drinking Water Directive in 2021, became operational in 2024, and is now being formally mandated to support implementation of the WFD, the EQS Directive, and the Groundwater Directive following the 2025 agreement on their revision.

Why does it matter to chemical industry?

The EU legal framework on water directly affects several aspects of the chemical industry's operations and permitting. It is therefore essential that ongoing and upcoming processes for developing or revising standards are transparent, that stakeholders have meaningful opportunities to contribute, and that sufficient time is allocated for scientific and technical assessment.

What do we need?

ECHA Committees should retain sufficient expertise and resources to develop and revise EQS and the Watch List. The process should be transparent, allow adequate time for stakeholder input, and provide sufficient time to assess underlying scientific evidence.

Maintain predictability and legal certainty by keeping methodological updates coherent, transparent, and anchored in established science (including existing Technical Guidance Documents and methodologies recommended by the JRC). If revision is envisaged, early and structured engagement with stakeholders is essential.

Strengthen collaboration between all stakeholders to ensure effective implementation and enforceable measures. As the Directive plays a pivotal role in shaping water management, permitting

decisions, and long-term environmental planning, the upcoming revision should deliver clear, coherent, and implementable rules for all stakeholders.

Cefic is looking forward to sharing its ideas and exploring potential policy solutions with the European Commission and Co-legislators in due course.

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About Cefic:

Cefic, the European Chemical Industry Council, is the forum of large, medium and small chemical companies across Europe, accounting for 1.2 million jobs and 13% of world chemicals production. On behalf of its members, Cefic's experts share industry insights and trends, and offer views and input to the EU agenda. Cefic also provides members with services, like guidance and trainings on regulatory and technical matters, while also contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge.