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Water Is Becoming a Critical Resource

Prospects for Climate-Resilient Water Management in Germany and the EU

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- › Water policy must be a priority part of climate adaptation policy at both national and European level. This requires whole-of-government cooperation – ideally using existing structures – and the integration of water policy into other policy areas.
- › When implementing existing water policy strategies, incentives need to be created for the careful use of water and conflicts over land and usage must be regulated in a regionally differentiated way.
- › Water is increasingly becoming a competitive factor. This creates new business models for the economy.
- › The German Federal Government's infrastructure package should be used to adapt water infrastructure to the challenges and to intensify research and awareness-raising among the population on water issues.
- › The Member States of the European Union share water resources, making it necessary to continually improve the coordination of water-related measures. At the same time, European leadership in water technology should be harnessed at EU level to assume a leadership role in water diplomacy.
- › Challenges related to water are never just hydrological or ecological phenomena, but have economic, social and political implications, too. These challenges can be shaped, however – by looking at the big picture over the long term as well as through the courageous and innovative cooperation of politics, business, science and civil society at national, European and global level.

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Are We Up to Our Necks in Water?

Record heat at the start of July, increased risk of forest fires already in the first few months of the year – during a Spring that was one of the driest since weather records began in 1881.¹ Fires in France, Greece and Spain, floods in Italy and Lithuania – extreme weather events as a result of climate change lead to costly damage and endanger or destroy livelihoods, even in Europe and especially in Germany. A particular challenge here is that, according to scientific insights, changes are becoming less predictable, which curtails scope for action in water-related threat and emergency situations.² Water scarcity is on the increase both in Germany and around the world. What is more, water supplies are coming under pressure due to pollution, overuse and in the context of generating energy from renewable sources.

Virtually no other impact of climate change is likely to affect humanity more seriously than a shortage of water; it already harbours the potential for economic and ecological conflict and may jeopardise the security and cohesion of societies in the future.

It is therefore vital to counteract this in good time in order to secure the quantity and quality of water resources over the long term, to moderate conflicts of interests between consumers, industry and agriculture, and at the same time to leverage the potential that water holds with regard to adaptation to climate change.

Yet, has this fact now reached all the areas where adjustments need to be made and interlinked: in politics, business and society – both nationally and internationally?

The following will consider the role that these three stakeholder groups should play so as to achieve sustainable water management.

The (Water) State of Affairs

“Water is the basis of all life”, is the first sentence of the German Federal Government’s interdepartmental National Water Strategy (NWS) adopted by the traffic light coalition in 2023, and whose vision and strategic goals are to be implemented by 2050.³ Water is needed everywhere. It

can be a problem or a solution – the subject of conflict as well as a unifying resource. Besides climate change, there is scarcely any other environmental issue with greater economic and ecological friction than water management.⁴

Having said that, water is not only an environmental element, but an economically relevant factor, too: whether that be in the production of goods, energy generation or as a transport route for cargo ships. This also harbours potential for conflicts of distribution and interests, which must be taken into account in water management. This includes the question of how much space we allocate to water: as a “blue” element in rivers, lakes, reservoirs and groundwater, in the form of so-called “green water” – bound in the ground, for cooling and infiltration in heavily sealed urban areas, for agriculture and thus food production, for energy generation and as a waterway. Currently, agriculture accounts for approx. 72 per cent of all freshwater extractions worldwide, industry accounts for 15 per cent and municipalities and households for 13 per cent. Yet, there are considerable regional and income-related differences⁵ – in particular when it comes to virtual water flows; i.e. the water required to manufacture goods and contained therein.

Another unanswered question is who should decide on priorities in these matters – most notably in a federally organised country like the Federal Republic of Germany, but also in the framework of the European Union and worldwide, especially as water resources are unequally distributed both regionally and globally. For instance, according to UNESCO, approx. 2.2 billion people do not have safe access to clean drinking water and around half of the world’s population currently suffers, for at least part of the year, from severe water shortages.⁶ This has repercussions on the development of global health.

Here, politicians are called upon to create the appropriate framework conditions at national and international level that enable climate-resilient water management⁷ and efficiently implement existing water regulations and agreements.

The Role of Politics

The Topic of Water in the Coalition Agreement Between the CDU/CSU and SPD

Water supply, including disposal and treatment, is a key task underpinning the state’s provision of public services. There is broad political consensus on the need to secure and manage water resources in the longer term so that they can be utilised for many years to come. In their coalition agreement, the governing parties, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and Social Democrats (SPD), have committed themselves to the National Water Strategy at federal level. Since a large part of the process for developing the strategy had already taken place under the last CDU/CSU-led coalition with the SPD, such a pragmatic approach is also obvious. The aim is to implement prioritised measures of the National Water Strategy and jointly develop them with the federal states against the background of climate change. There are various commitments to the strengthening and long-term promotion of water infrastructure. A new feature is that a federal-state committee (*Bund-Länder-Gremium*) is to be set up to prepare the necessary cross-state water management measures against water shortages for affected rivers (for example the Spree).⁸ Policymakers are also focusing on the acceleration of flood and coastal protection as climate adaptation measures and aim to exempt water-conserving farms in water-scarce regions from restrictions. The priorities also include the development of nationwide guidelines for dealing with water scarcity – i.e. clarifying the issue of priority usage needs – as well as the establishment of coordinated, transparent prioritisation mechanisms and clear rules in the event of local or regional restrictions owing to water shortages.⁹ A Low Water Information System (NIWIS) is also being developed,

which will provide standardised nationwide information on this topic from the first quarter of 2026. The spatial overview and temporal categorisation of low water events, based on measurement data, enables experts and the interested or affected public to rigorously assess the current situation.¹⁰

Professional associations have largely welcomed these initial impulses and key points. Pragmatic implementation steps are now imperative.

Complex Legal Regulations in Germany and the EU

This also encompasses adapting the complex system of legal regulations at German and European level to the challenges posed by climate change so as to ensure resource protection, water infrastructure management and security of supply with regard to water quality and distribution. In Germany, public water supply enjoys a constitutionally enshrined priority arising from the welfare state and environmental state principle and is also based on the state's constitutional duty to protect the life and physical integrity of its citizens.¹¹ This once again highlights the fundamental importance of water as a resource. The waters are generally managed by the state.

The regulatory complexity here in Germany is exacerbated by the federal system: the Federal Government has concurrent legislative competence in water law (§ 1 WHG, Art. 74 (1) No. 32 of the Basic Law). At the heart of water protection legislation is the Water Management Act (WHG). The aim of this law is to create the legal prerequisites for sustainable water management and thus protect water as part of the ecosystem as the basis of human life, a habitat for animals and plants as well as a usable resource (§ 1 WHG). The WHG contains a number of opening clauses that afford the federal states scope for their own regulations in many areas.

Enforcement of water legislation lies exclusively with the federal states, where water management administration is usually organised on three levels: between state ministries (strategic control), regional councils or district governments (technical coordination) as well as districts and independent cities (local enforcement). Municipalities are responsible for drinking water supply and wastewater disposal. These tasks are regulated by state law and are fulfilled in various organisational forms (e. g. special purpose associations, owner-operated municipal enterprises). The German Working Group on water issues of the Federal States and the Federal Government (LAWA) serves to coordinate water management issues between the Federal and State Governments.

At European Union level, the legal *acquis* on the issue of water is extensive; this is hardly surprising given the fact that the Member States share rivers and coasts in some cases and thus also the challenges associated with water. Here, the EU lays down the framework, such as via the Water Framework Directive (WFD). When it comes to the concrete implementation of regulations in the Member States, they can take their specific, and sometimes very different local water situation as a starting point. In Germany, the aforementioned WHG, with its implementing ordinances for certain protection and management areas, such as the Groundwater Ordinance (GrwV), the Drinking Water Ordinance (TrinkwV) and the Wastewater Ordinance (AbwV) serve to implement the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). Its goal is to bring all rivers, lakes, groundwater and coastal waters into a "good condition" by 2027 at the latest.

Currently, the amended EU Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, which entered into force at the beginning of 2025, is due to be transposed into national law by the Member States. The deadline for this is 31 July 2027. The amendment aims not least to do justice to climate and environmental protection concerns: such as the improved purification of wastewater, especially in certain cases by requiring manufacturers of products that pose a threat to water quality to bear the costs

of a so-called fourth treatment stage. Municipalities, too, must draw up integrated wastewater management plans and Member States should ensure that municipal wastewater treatment plants strive for energy neutrality.

These examples show that much is to be done at the various regulatory levels. However, this situation also provides scope that can be used to adapt existing regulations and processes to the challenges arising for water management from the impact of climate change, pollution and infrastructure issues.

The Role of Business & Technology

Water is an indispensable production factor in industry, agriculture, energy generation and tourism. It is particularly relevant as cooling water in power stations, process water in industry and for irrigation in agriculture. What is more, rivers and seas are waterways for the transport of industrial goods. The Rhine, as Germany's longest river, is one of the most important European economic and transport axes. If shipping is restricted here or on other waterways due to high or low water, this is costly and damaging. According to an OECD analysis, periods of drought are now of longer duration and greater intensity than was the case at the turn of the millennium. Climate change plays a key role here, which has led to an increase in areas affected by drought.¹² The *Global Risk Report 2024* of the *World Economic Forum* indicates that five of the ten greatest long-term risks to the economy are connected to the resource of water: extreme weather events, the critical change in earth systems, a loss of biodiversity and the collapse of ecosystems, the scarcity of natural resources as well as pollution¹³

At the same time, the economy is often dependent on energy. In turn, water is also of great importance for its production. A very high proportion of water abstraction in Germany is connected to energy supply; according to the National Water Strategy from 2023, some 44 per cent. While 70 per cent of groundwater and spring water is extracted for public water supply, for example, water extraction for energy supply is predominantly cooling water from rivers, which is fed into power plants.¹⁴ Thus periods of low water once again pose a particular risk here.

Efficiency and Resource Conservation Through Circular Water Utilisation

If economic stakeholders and agricultural production are so greatly affected by the impact of water-related extreme situations, it is clear that they must integrate water risks into their business models and bear responsibility for sustainable water usage. They can also shoulder this responsibility by using water-efficient appliances, innovative processes and new technologies. According to the European Patent Office, Europe holds 40 per cent of worldwide patents for water technology.¹⁵

For instance, "water-smart industrial symbioses" (WSIS) can be used to harness treated wastewater as a resource, such as for industrial cooling. Here, industry and water management join forces for their mutual benefit in order to recover and reuse water, materials and energy. In this way, circular economy can markedly reduce dependence on scarce fresh water resources, in particular for water-intensive production, for example in the textile and chemical industries as well as in the energy sector, and in water-scarce regions.¹⁶ The wastewater treatment processes also afford potential for energy recovery.

Added to this, wastewater treatment using membrane technologies within the framework of WSIS makes it possible to provide high-quality water for industrial cooling systems, which represents a locational advantage for high-tech industry. In the South-east Asian city-state of Singapore, treated wastewater has been purified via multi-filtration or ultra-filtration or reverse osmosis and

converted into ultra-pure drinking water as part of the NEWater initiative since as early as the start of the 2000s.¹⁷ The treated water is used for cooling purposes by companies, especially in semiconductor production, where high-purity water is required. Singapore has therefore developed into an attractive location for this critical future technology. NEWater is used for cooling buildings (air conditioning systems), too. In dry periods, the treated water is also fed into the drinking water supply when water becomes scarce. This means that water treatment takes account of both sustainable water usage and the aspect of supply security.

Studies suggest that it can be a success factor for companies if they consider other factors in addition to climate risk, such as water quality or a loss of biodiversity and have an overview of the entire value chain.¹⁸ Having said that, only a minority of companies appear to be willing to adopt such a comprehensive view. Added to this, companies do not publish sufficient data – for example on water utilisation.

Data Situation Could Be Improved

Speaking of data: a further aspect is that of virtual water flows, i.e. the quantities of water consumed or polluted in the production of goods or services¹⁹; even if this takes place outside the location where they are consumed. For products and services consumed in Germany, this proportion is approx. 86 per cent, as determined by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) in its extensive report with recommendations to national and international water policy. Some 65 to 90 per cent of global flows of virtual water derive from trade in agricultural products, which often takes place with low-income countries, exacerbates water scarcity there and can sometimes threaten food security. Whereas these flows are well documented scientifically, there is still a need for research into the industrial and energy sectors. It can also be assumed that consumers are not yet sufficiently aware of the virtual water footprint.²⁰

A (Still) “Water-Blind” Society?

Water problems often become more prominent in public consciousness when there are reports about the devastating effects of extreme weather events or people are personally affected by them. Nevertheless, only a very small percentage of the population sees water-related crises as the most pressing problem. The complex interrelationships between the impact of climate change or other issues considered to be urgent, such as migration and water supply, are less well known. German citizens generally have positive associations with the topic of water, as demonstrated in a survey for the Water Atlas 2025: water is refreshing, natural and essential for survival, and we as a society should take better care of our water (87 per cent of respondents). However, industry, water management and politics are seen to bear the primary responsibility for this, and less so our own use of water.²¹

This finding implies that risk awareness with regard to water in general and also an awareness of local water problems in society still need to be raised. The media are increasingly picking up on water-related topics. Children and young people are already taught in school about the importance of using water carefully and sparingly, and they are educated about the links between water crises and climate change. Education and participation programmes should also be expanded for adults, however; including local initiatives for practical knowledge sharing and for promoting self-organisation in view of the uncertainty that is becoming the norm. Interest groups and municipal associations could also be involved. In the interests of social cohesion, these programmes ought to also provide knowledge about the different adaptive capacities and particular vulnerability of various social groups, such as children, people with disabilities and senior citizens.

This could therefore increase society's resilience to water crises over time. Incentives for water conservation and efficient water use in everyday life, for example via the widespread installation

of smart water meters, could actively involve private households and make them realise that they can contribute through self-determined action which is economically beneficial for them, too.

The European Water Resilience Strategy

Beyond the national context, it is important to keep an eye on the European level; after all, many water resources are shared between countries – and thus also the challenges surrounding water management. That is why transnational legal regulations and standards are required, especially since water emergencies are on the rise in Europe. Europe is the continent that is warming the fastest as a result of climate change. Around one third of the EU population lives in regions that are permanently or seasonally affected by water scarcity.²² This fact is reflected in the EU Water Resilience Strategy published at the beginning of June.

“We need a serious debate about water”, according to EU Environment Commissioner Jessika Roswall in an interview with FAZ.²³ It was probably with this in mind that the EU Commission presented an *EU Water Resilience Strategy* at the beginning of June 2025, which initially contains concrete measures for the period until 2030 so as to make Europe water-resilient by 2050. For these measures, the Strategy is based on the principle of *water efficiency first*. The three objectives of the Strategy are: restoring and protecting the water cycle, creating a *water-smart economy* to increase the EU’s competitiveness, as well as securing clean and affordable water and sanitation for everyone.

The new strategy views water resilience as a matter of security and crisis preparedness. For that reason, water infrastructure is to be covered by the *Critical Entities Resilience Directive*, CER²⁴ and the Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union (NIS2)²⁵.

The EU Commission also views strides towards water resilience as a business opportunity for EU industry. Innovations through digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI) are seen as harbouring the potential for speeding up and simplifying water management. The EU Strategy also emphasises the above-mentioned importance of education, awareness-raising and participatory governance.

The Strategy’s implementation is monitored by means of a systematic process encompassing both institutional mechanisms as well as technological and regulatory instruments. As of December 2025, the EU Commission intends to convene a *Water Resilience Forum* of EU water stakeholders every two years to evaluate the implementation of the Strategy as well as progress in promoting water resilience at all levels of government, in the economy, and in civil society. Here, knowledge on water management can be exchanged and pooled at various governmental and non-governmental levels. Adjustments to the measures provided for in the Strategy will also be made where necessary. A central monitoring instrument is the structured dialogue with Member States, regions and water authorities. The goal is to close implementation gaps in existing Directives, such as the Water Framework Directive and the Flood Risk Management Directive. The Strategy also focuses on digitalisation and AI for real-time monitoring (*smart metering*), which may promote data sharing on water-relevant developments between Member States.

The Strategy explicitly emphasises that, in light of the different circumstances and vulnerability regarding water – be it quantity, quality or both – in the EU Member States, they themselves are responsible for organising their own water management. Both the monitoring projects relating to implementation of the Strategy and the consideration of subsidiarity at EU level are heading in the right direction. It is important to avoid duplicate structures and excessive bureaucracy. This should be monitored in the coming years.

Milestones for Climate-Resilient Water Management

Water resources must be secured, managed and utilised over the long term. In theory, there is consensus on this – the strategy documents at federal and EU level testify to it.

The following now appears to be important above all:

- Strategies and legal provisions – especially at EU level – must be **implemented** as a priority, and suitable **monitoring** of successes and **adaptation needs** must be put in place. These will continue to arise, not least due to developments caused by climate change.
- In doing so, **incentives** need to be created for the careful use of water, and, with the involvement of affected stakeholders – Federal Government, states, municipalities, professional associations, industry and the general public – **conflicts over land and its use must be regulated in a regionally differentiated way**. Water quality and quantity must be considered together.
- Water policy needs to be a priority part of climate adaptation policy. This requires **whole-of-government cooperation** and the integration of water policy into other policy areas, including security policy – at national and EU level. Water infrastructure is part of the critical infrastructure (perhaps the most basic of all) and must be prioritised as such. Knowledge and experience at regional, national, and European level should be pooled to this end.
- **Existing structures** in particular should be used for **coordination** so as to minimise bureaucratic efforts and not waste any time. With this in mind, the question arises as to how the federal-state committee envisaged in the coalition agreement for the transnational preparation of water management measures against water scarcity for rivers will differ in its powers from the existing German Working Group on water issues of the Federal States and the Federal Government (LAWA). In addition to precautions against water shortages, we need to shift to a higher gear when it comes to flood and coastal protection.
- **Water infrastructure** must be maintained, expanded and adapted to the climate. It is also a matter of intensifying the circular use of water through innovative solutions so as to increase resilience.
- **Policy-related research** on the topic of water (management) must be promoted, digitalisation in water management must be driven forward and existing technologies must be scaled up.
- The Federal Government's adopted **infrastructure package** should be used to both adapt **water infrastructure** to the challenges and to intensify **research** and **awareness-raising** among the population on water issues. Framework conditions should be created that enable innovations to be turned into *business cases*. Real-world laboratories for water management could make an important contribution here.
- Water will increasingly become a **competitive factor**. This is giving rise to new business models for the economy: be it with regard to water-saving **technologies**, circulating water utilisation or in the promotion of research. The economy uses water in many ways and is therefore responsible, together with politicians, for protecting it.

- The Member States of the **European Union** share water resources, making it necessary to continually improve the coordination of water-related measures. At the same time, European leadership in water technology should be harnessed at EU level to assume a leading role in **water diplomacy** and to strategically and confidently represent this at the upcoming UN water conferences in 2026 and 2028, also in support of developing countries.

Challenges surrounding water are never just hydrological or ecological phenomena. Rather, they also have an economic, social and political impact. These challenges can be shaped, however – by looking at the big picture over the long term as well as through the courageous and innovative co-operation of politics, business, science and civil society at national, European and global level. If diverse thought processes are followed by action, water crisis management could culminate in water risk management and water resilience can be built.²⁶

Resilience is more of an attitude than a state of affairs; one which responds to a constant need to adapt and creates the framework conditions for this. By pragmatically setting priorities in water policy, politicians could exploit this as an opportunity to demonstrate their much-doubted problem-solving expertise in an elementary issue – one which is still often underestimated for society, business and nature, but is of great urgency.

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[wbgu_hg2024_zf.pdf](#) [last accessed on: 28/07/2025]

³ [National Water Strategy – Cabinet decision dated 15 March 2023](#)
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⁴ [Kampf ums Wasser: Die neue Regierung ist gefordert \[Fight for Water: The New Government Faces a Challenge | FAZ](#) [last accessed on: 29/07/2025].

⁵ [FAO AQUASTAT Dissemination System](#) [last accessed on: 29/07/2025]

⁶ [The United Nations World Water Development Report 2024: water for prosperity and peace – UNESCO Digital Library, IPCC AR6 SYR SPM.pdf](#) [last accessed on: 29/07/2025]

⁷ [WBGU, Policy Paper No. 14, “EU-Wasserpolitik im Aufbruch: Die EU-Wasserresilienzstrategie als Chance nutzen” \[The Dawn of EU Water Policy: Using the EU Water Resilience Strategy as an Opportunity\]](#) [last accessed on: 21/07/2025]

⁸ [“Verantwortung für Deutschland”, Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, 21. Legislaturperiode \[“Responsibility for Germany”, Coalition Agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD, 21st legislative period\]](#), in particular para 1329 et seqq. [Last accessed on: 29/07/2025]

⁹ Federal Environmental Agency, Projektinformation Entwicklung von Leitlinien für den Umgang mit Wasserknappheit [Project Information Development of Guidelines for Dealing with Water Scarcity], October 2024 to October 2026: [projektsteckbrief leitlinien wasserknappheit final.pdf](#) [last accessed on: 29/07/2025]

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- ¹³ [Global Risks Report 2024 | World Economic Forum | World Economic Forum](#) [last accessed on: 04/09/2025]
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- ¹⁵ European Patent Office, [Innovation in water-related technologies](#), July 2024 [last accessed on: 04/09/2025]
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- ¹⁸ [CDP Corporate Health Check 2025, Berichte über Umweltfolgen: Was gegen den Klimawandel hilft \[Reports about Environmental Repercussions: What Helps Against Climate Change\] | FAZ](#) [last accessed on: 09/09/2025]
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- ²⁰ [Wasseratlas 2025: Daten und Fakten über die Grundlage allen Lebens \[Water Atlas 2025: Data and Facts about the Basis of All Life\]](#), p. 46 [last accessed on: 03/09/2025]
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- ²³ [EU-Umweltkommissarin Roswall im Interview über Wasserknappheit | FAZ \[EU Environment Commissioner Rowall in an interview about water scarcity | FAZ\]](#) [last accessed on: 04/09/2025]
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Disclaimer

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