European citizens have a key role to play in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. The directive calls for the public to be informed and involved in the preparation of river basin management plans, which identify measures to improve water quality. Public input will help Member States balance environmental, economic and social priorities in these plans.

The Water Framework Directive


The directive establishes an innovative approach for water management based on river basins, the natural geographical and hydrological units, and sets specific deadlines for Member States to achieve ambitious environmental objectives for aquatic ecosystems. The directive addresses inland surface waters, transitional waters, coastal waters and groundwater. Article 14 of the directive covers public information and consultation (see page 3 for the text of this article).
What do we mean by public participation?

Public participation means giving the public and stakeholders the opportunity to influence the outcome of the plans and then working processes. It is one of the “Aarhus rights” that all EU citizens enjoy (see the box below).

Public participation depends on another Aarhus right, public information. Here, the Water Framework Directive (WFD) calls for providing information to the public on river basin management plans.

Participation occurs via consultation mechanisms that government bodies use to consult people and interested organisations (stakeholders) to gain from their knowledge and experience and to jointly develop solutions to problems. Consultation can be either written, the basic form of consultation, or oral, where members of the public and stakeholders discuss issues in an open meeting with the authorities. Both methods are often used.

Where consultation works well, the public and stakeholders participate actively in the development and implementation of river basin plans. This leads to shared decision-making, where they become jointly responsible for the outcome of a plan. Active participation in development and shared decision-making are not required by the directive but may be regarded as best practice.

What should be included in a river basin management plan?

River basin management plans integrate environmental goals, social concerns and economic factors for all types of bodies of waters -- rivers and lakes, estuaries and other transitional waters, coastal waters and groundwater. For each river basin district, the plans define the bodies of water not meeting the directive's environmental targets and describe the reasons for this, such as what is causing problems and risks. They contain a programme of measures – the actions and activities to be carried out to address these pressures and maintain or improve the quality of the water.

According to the Water Framework Directive, each plan should contain the following information:

- A general description of the characteristics of the river basin district, including maps
- A summary of the main pressures and human impacts
- A map of specially protected areas (e.g. bathing waters, areas for habitats or species protection)
- A map of the monitoring networks
- A list of the environmental objectives or targets
- A summary of the programme of measures to maintain or improve water status
- A summary of the public consultations and their influence on the plan
- A list of competent authorities and a contact point for receiving more information.

The Aarhus rights

The Aarhus Convention (The Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters) gives a number of rights to the public:

- the right to have access to information on the environment held by government authorities,
- the right to participate in the decisions taken by these authorities that affect the environment, and
- the right to review and legally challenge such decisions.

These three “pillars” of the Aarhus Convention were adopted by the European Union in 2003 through two directives (Directive 2003/4/EC on public access to environmental information and Directive 2003/35/EC providing for public participation in environmental plans and programmes). Both directives contain provisions on access to justice, the third pillar.

Public participation in drawing up river basin management plans

The Water Framework Directive acknowledges that its success relies on close cooperation with the public and stakeholders at local level and their involvement in key decisions (the text of its Article 14 is provided in the box on the next page).

Participation is especially important for the development of river basin management plans (RBMPs), which are at the heart of the WFD’s implementation (see box).

To ensure the participation of the public and stakeholders in establishing and updating river basin management plans, the directive recognises that it is necessary to provide proper information to the public of planned measures before final decisions on the measures are adopted. In addition, access should be given to all background documents and information used for the development of the RBMP. Once a plan is in place, authorities need to report on the progress of its implementation to the public and stakeholders.

Public participation extends to all water users, to non-governmental organisations, such as local and national environmental groups, and to other stakeholders. Key organisations and citizens’ groups likely to be affected by the plan need to be identified and involved. In some cases, such as in large or geographically varied districts, authorities may want to put in place consultation mechanisms for individual sub-basins.

For Europe’s many international river basin districts, consultation will need to extend across Member States and to some neighbouring countries.
Article 14 of the Water Framework Directive

1. Member States shall encourage the active involvement of all interested parties in the implementation of this Directive, in particular in the production, review and updating of the river basin management plans. Member States shall ensure that, for each river basin district, they publish and make available for comments to the public, including users:

   (a) a timetable and work programme for the production of the plan, including a statement of the consultation measures to be taken, at least three years before the beginning of the period to which the plan refers;
   (b) an interim overview of the significant water management issues identified in the river basin, at least two years before the beginning of the period to which the plan refers;
   (c) draft copies of the river basin management plan, at least one year before the beginning of the period to which the plan refers.

On request, access shall be given to background documents and information used for the development of the draft river basin management plan.

2. Member States shall allow at least six months to comment in writing on those documents in order to allow active involvement and consultation.

3. Paragraphs 1 and 2 shall apply equally to updated river basin management plans.
Key steps in preparing river basin management plans

Starting from the early stages of the process of preparing river basin management plans, government authorities need to establish adequate consultation mechanisms at river basin district level. An EU research project, HarmoniCOP, reviewed different methods and good practices for consultation (see the box at right).

One of the first steps in drafting the management plans is to analyse the characteristics of river basin districts – i.e. review the impact of human activity on surface and groundwater. European guidelines and other information have been prepared with stakeholder involvement (see the box below).

In each river basin district, Member States need to draw up timetables for the preparation of management plans, a proposed work programme and the schedule for public and stakeholder engagement. This consultation had to start at the latest by December 2006 for the first cycle.

Working with stakeholder organisations at EU level

The WFD is a complex and far-reaching directive. It is essential that all the competent authorities and public organisations working towards its implementation have a common approach. A Common Implementation Strategy was agreed in 2001. As a part of that strategy the work of the Europe-wide Strategic Coordination Group plays a crucial role in overseeing a number of working groups and activities. The Group is formed by participants of all 27 EU Member States, EFTA and candidate countries, NGOs and other stakeholders. Several guidance documents have been developed and agreed, including one on Public participation in relation to the Water Framework Directive.

Public consultation can play an important role in helping to identify the main activities that affect surface water and groundwater. In addition, public discussions can raise awareness of key problems that affect the aquatic environment and the ways to address them. After a basin’s characteristics have been identified, an analysis of the significant water management issues and possible measures needed to address them will be the key building blocks for the draft management plan. A six month consultation on these issues had to start no later than December 2007.

Improving Participation: the HarmoniCOP project

To improve public participation in river basin management planning, an EU project called HarmoniCOP (Harmonising Collaborative Planning) studied the participative methods used across Europe. Partners from 15 Member States together with experts from NGOs, local government, policy makers, water industry and the agricultural sector participated in HarmoniCOP. The project developed a handbook based on the examples of best practice that were found. This handbook, Learning together to manage together - Improving participation in water management, is on the project website: http://www.harmonicop.uos.de/handbook.php. It focuses on building a robust framework of public participation in river basin management planning.

Finally, the draft river basin management plans should then be opened for six months of public consultation starting, at the latest, in December 2008. Member States have taken a number of different approaches for consultation, and some even started early such as in France, where consultation on the draft river basin management plans took place in 2008 (see the box below). More information on ongoing consultations can be found at: http://water.europa.eu/participate.

Comments and information from the public and stakeholders must be considered when drawing up the final management plans that are to be published. The first plans by all Member States are due in December 2009, and will be revised every six years. Fresh consultations are required for each revision. As part of these consultations, governments must provide the public and stakeholders with information on the results of current plans and to take part in discussions on the lessons learned in implementing the plans.

Public consultation in France

In France, the government organised a national consultation on draft river basin management plans in 2008, which involved activities in each river basin district. In the Loire-Bretagne basin, for example, consultation included open discussions, exhibitions, information centres and activities such as guided tours and theatre productions. (See http://www.prenons-soin-de-leau.fr)

To learn more about the Water Framework Directive and Europe’s waters, see the Water Information System for Europe (WISE) website at http://water.europa.eu. The European Commission’s web pages, which are linked to WISE, provide further information on the directive and its implementation: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/index_en.htm.