

Request for an opinion on the development of minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge in the EU

1 Background

The European Commission is encouraging increased water recycling in the EU in order to improve water supply options. The "*Blueprint to safeguard Europe's water resources*", published in November 2012, made clear that one alternative supply option - water reuse for irrigation or industrial purposes - has emerged as an issue requiring EU attention (COM(2012) 673). Reuse of water (e.g. from waste water treatment or industrial installations) is considered to have a lower environmental impact than other alternative water supplies (e.g. water transfers or desalination), but it is only used to a limited extent in the EU. This appears to be due to the lack of common EU environmental/health standards for reused water and the potential obstacles to the free movement of agricultural products irrigated with reused water. As a continuation to the Blueprint, the Commission aims to look into the most suitable EU-level instrument to encourage water reuse, including the possibility of a regulation establishing common standards. The Commission intends to make a proposal, subject to an appropriate impact assessment, to ensure the maintenance of a high level of public health and environmental protection in the EU.

As a follow-up, the Commission launched a support contract to carry out an impact assessment for a potential EU-level instrument on water reuse. Following the Commission guidelines to develop impact assessment studies, the report, which was completed in March 2014, includes a description of the problem definition and of the baseline situation regarding water reuse in the EU, and elaborates on policy options to be developed in an initiative by the Commission. It also includes detailed annexes about the existing policy measures in Member States.

In the Strategic Implementation Plan of the European Innovation Partnership on Water (EIPW, 2012), water reuse is a top-listed priority area.

To inform about this impact assessment, the European Commission organised a Public Consultation on Policy Options to optimise water reuse in the EU. The aim of the public consultation was to evaluate the most suitable EU-level instrument(s) to foster water reuse, while ensuring the health and environmental safety of water reuse practices and the free trade of food products. In this consultation the design of an EU regulatory standard on water reuse was broadly supported, both by citizens, public administrations and the private sector.

In parallel to the impact assessment work, the Commission is carrying out consultations with Member States and stakeholders in the framework of the Common Implementation Strategy (CIS) for the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, namely through the established Working Group on the Programme of Measures (WG PoM).

In conclusion, the establishment of minimum quality requirements for water reuse received strong support from the WG PoM and the public consultation. The Commission intends to submit the most suitable measure(s) on water reuse to the Impact Assessment Board for an opinion. In case of a positive opinion on the proposed measure(s), the corresponding EU-level instruments will be drafted for adoption by the Commission.

DG ENV requested the JRC to develop the minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge by the end of 2016. In December 2014 the Joint Research Centre (JRC) published the report “Water reuse in Europe. Relevant guidelines, needs for and barriers to innovation” providing a synoptic overview of relevant regulations and guidelines on water reuse, analysing the associated technical, environmental, health and socioeconomic challenges to such reuse.

Considering the sensitivity of the health issue and public confidence in water reuse practice, the opinion of SCHER will be requested on the draft final proposal by the JRC. To ensure the envisaged methodology and process are likely to lead to an appropriate proposal, the SCHER will participate in the expert group meetings which will develop the minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge.

Envisaged timeline 2015-2016

The envisaged timeline is foreseen:

- beginning of June 2016: Consolidated draft technical report
- end of October 2016: SCHER opinion on the draft JRC report the minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge
- November/December 2016: Final technical report

2 Terms of reference

In view of the relevance of this mandate, the SCHER is requested to participate in the expert group to develop the minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge. The SCHER will provide its opinion on the following points:

- Is the report of a sufficient quality and appropriate to develop the minimum quality requirements for water reuse in agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge?
- Is the proposed methodology considered appropriate to develop the minimum quality requirements on water reuse for agricultural irrigation and aquifer recharge?