



**POLITICAL  
INTELLIGENCE**

# Guide to Germany's first National Water Strategy

*“Water is the basis for all life.” So begins Germany’s first National Water Strategy which was agreed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s cabinet on 15 March, 2023. While Germany has traditionally been blessed with an abundance of water, the growing impact of climate change and the ever-present risk of pollution have led the government to produce a long-term plan for managing the resource which is as vital to households in Europe’s largest economy as it is for farmers, the energy sector and industry. The strategy sets out 10 strategic goals, ranging from preventing shortages and improving data, to protecting marine areas and raising awareness of the value of water as a vital resource, along with an action plan comprising 78 specific measures to be implemented up until 2050. While politicians and stakeholders have welcomed the ambition, scope, and timeliness of the strategy, some said the plan lacked detail in key areas such as financing and timing.*

*This Dods Political Intelligence report, produced by our German-language service, provides a one-stop guide to the National Water Strategy, including an overview, and examples of some its key elements, and a selection of political and stakeholder reactions to the long-term plan.*

## Overview and key elements

Germany has traditionally had more than enough water for its needs, from domestic use and sanitation, to agriculture, transport, energy, and industry. However, the growing threat of climate change has fueled concerns about sustainable water usage and raised questions about how cities, reservoirs, and sewage systems should adapt. Summers are becoming hotter and drier, while heavy rainfall has become more common but snow less frequent. At the same time, pollution from nitrates, phosphorous and microplastics pose a constant threat, while changes in land use and lifestyles also present fresh challenges for water management. Two recent disasters have helped bring home the importance of sound water management for many Germans: the 2021 floods in the region of the Ahr valley which killed at least 180 people and caused some €30bn in damage; and the large-scale pollution of the river Oder in 2022, causing the death of thousands of fish, which Steffi Lemke, the Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Security and Consumer Protection, fears could happen again in 2023.

Germany’s first ever long-term plan for managing water resources has been a few years in the making. To help develop the strategy, the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection ([BMUV](#)) and the German Environment Agency/Umweltbundesamt ([UBA](#)) carried out a so-called National Water Dialogue between October 2018 and October 2020, consulting with experts from a wide variety of sectors, from agriculture to industry. At the same time, it also gathered views and recommendations from a random selection of citizens across the country as part of a National Citizens Dialogue. The BMUV presented its draft [National Water Strategy](#) in June 2021, which was then subject to further discussions with representatives from the



federal states and associations. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's cabinet approved the strategy on 15 March 2023, paving the way for its implementation through to 2050.

The strategy outlines five key goals: ensuring there will always be high-quality and affordable drinking water in 30 years and beyond; supporting cleaner bodies of water and groundwater; strengthening and restoring the natural water balance; ensuring wastewater disposal is organized in accordance with the polluter responsibility principle; and adapting water supply infrastructure and water use to the consequences of climate change.

The plan is split into 10 policy areas:

- Protect, restore and permanently secure the near-natural water balance - preventing water scarcity and conflicting goals
- Realise water-friendly and climate-adapted land use in rural and urban areas
- Further develop sustainable water management - achieve and ensure good status
- Limit risks from substance inputs
- Further develop water infrastructures to adapt to the climate - protect against extreme events and ensure supply
- Connect water, energy and material cycles
- Strengthen efficient administrations, improve data flows, optimize regulatory frameworks and secure financing
- Protect marine areas (North Sea and Baltic Sea) more intensively against material inputs
- Raise awareness of water as a resource
- Work together to sustainably protect global water resources

The long-term plan sets out a work programme of 78 specific measures, many of which are due to start by 2025 and some in the latter half of the decade, which are to be implemented through a mix of funding, legal regulations, knowledge building and dialogue. For example, measures designed to secure the supply of drinking water include developing guidelines for regional shortages, setting up a hierarchy to determine usage priorities in times of scarcity, introducing incentives to encourage industry and agriculture to avoid wasting water, and examining whether water withdrawal fees and smart water tariffs can also crack down on wastage. Measures to support the ambition for "clean water in all rivers and lakes" include aligning agriculture with water conservation, strengthening organic farming, fairer distribution of clean-up costs, and introducing an expanded version of the planned EU regulation of "extended manufacturer responsibility in water law" as quickly as possible.

In terms of next steps, the Bundestag has referred the strategy to the Committee on the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (leading), the Committee on Food and Agriculture, the Committee on Health, the Committee on Transport, and the Committee on Climate Change and Energy to give their opinions. The government is also due to set up a ministerial working group with the participation of the federal states to coordinate, support, and provide updates on the implementation of the strategy.

The government has signaled that some of the measures would come to fruition within the current parliamentary term, with various ministries contributing to the effort. Work on a national guideline ensuring fresh water availability has already begun in federal states drawing from stakeholder input. Elsewhere, the federal government is supporting municipalities that promote water-smart urban development and implement the [White Paper on Green Space in the City](#). A national low water level information system (Niedrigwasserinformationssystem, NIWIS) is also being developed at the Federal Institute of Hydrology (BfG). And on the legislative front, the BMUV is drafting an amendment to the [Federal Water Act \(WHG\)](#) and other water-related regulations in line with the strategy. It also aims to commission a communication strategy later in 2023 to raise public awareness about water use.

The National Water Strategy is designed to work with several existing and planned environmental and agricultural policies including the recently announced [National Security Strategy](#), the [Climate protection plans for 2030 and 2050](#), and [White paper on Green Spaces in the City](#) and the future [Federal program for adapting urban areas to climate change](#). It also aims to contribute to the implementation of the [goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and related initiatives, such as the [UN Decade "Water for Sustainable Development"](#) and ["Restoring Ecosystems"](#). Days after the German cabinet approved the National Water Strategy, nations gathered at the [UN 2023 Water Conference in New York on 22/24 March](#) adopted the Water Action Agenda, a set of voluntary commitments to accomplish sustainable development goals related to water.

Germany is not the only European country to act on growing concerns about water scarcity and quality which have become increasingly acute in recent years, particularly in southern Europe. In May, Spain's government said it would be spending €2.2bn on generating new water supplies from desalination plants and urban reuse and aid to farmers in a bid to alleviate the impact of one of the most severe droughts in decades. In France, which suffered one of its worst summer droughts on record in 2022, President Emmanuel Macron announced a [water savings plan](#) on 30 March. It included more than 50 measures to help reuse and conserve water, an €180m fund to repair leaks, and plans to make water more costly for those who use too much. Opposition parties have long called for a long-term water strategy in France, which is home to the EU's biggest agriculture sector. Macron's announcement came less than one week after police clashed with hundreds of protesters demonstrating against the construction of a large reservoir for farming irrigation, dubbed the "mega basin", in Sainte-Soline in western France.

The German strategy builds on existing EU regulations which govern water management in the bloc's 27 member states. These include the [Water Framework Directive \(WFD\) \(2000/60/EC\)](#), which aims to ensure the 'good status' for all ground and surface waters across the EU. Germany is also subject to the EU's recast [Drinking Water Directive \(2020/2184\)](#), which came into force in January 2021 and governs the access and quality of water for human consumption. The [Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#) aims to ensure

agriculture supports the EU's water policies, while the [EU Regulation 2020/741](#) ensures that reclaimed water is safe for agricultural irrigation, and safeguarding water is also a key aspect of the European Green Deal.

## Reactions

The following section provides summaries and excerpts of views on the National Water Strategy put forward by lawmakers and stakeholders, including hyperlinks to sources.

### Political

Steffi Lemke, Federal Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection, said in an [interview published 15 March how the National Water Strategy would help tackle water supply issues](#): "In the National Water Strategy, we advocate the creation of water supply or water use concepts that show ways of reconciling forecast water requirements and water supplies at regional level." She later said in a Bundestag debate on the Strategy on 19 April that it provided, "the basis so that we can take precautions so that clean drinking water can be made available throughout Germany at all times in the future."

During the same Bundestag debate on [the briefing](#) provided by the Federal government, the following lawmakers commented:

**Helmut Kleebank (SPD)**, [rapporteur, said](#), "The National Water Strategy is an important start and a huge success in securing water as the basis of life for everyone. Last year's summer drought, the Oder disaster, the accumulation of microplastics and multi-resistant germs as well as the flooding of the Ahr valley, made us aware of the importance of water for central areas of our lives. These events show that the effects of climate change are already being felt. This increases the pressure to act to find solutions to ensure the availability of water as a resource."

**Dunja Kreiser (SPD)** described the strategy as the "foundation for the further development of modern water management" and noted that for the first time ever, producer responsibility is being discussed and demanded in the municipal wastewater guideline. "Manufacturer responsibility means: How do companies deal with water? And most importantly, what other products are they putting on the market in terms of drug traces and microplastics?"

**Muhabad Al-Halak (FDP)** noted the importance of flood defences: "The flash flood in the Ahr valley left behind incredible suffering, destroyed livelihoods and 50 billion euros in follow-up costs. No matter how urgently these 50 billion euros are needed there and no matter how well they are used, it must be clear to all of us here that we simply cannot afford so much suffering, so much destruction and such high follow-up costs in the future."

Dr Jan-Niclas Gesenhues (Bündnis 90/THE GREENS) appealed "to all departments to get the funding guidelines on the table and not to block them any longer, so that associations, municipalities, citizens and agricultural businesses can use this money to make our nature healthy again and make ecosystems fit as natural allies for water protection."

[Astrid Damerow \(CDU/CSU\)](#), **rapporteur**, welcomed the strategy but added that "Financing is also unclear and the progress of implementation is difficult to measure". She also said: "The water strategy is an important but at the same time very ambitious approach to reorganizing the entire use of water as a resource in Germany. The federal government is well advised to proceed in a solution-oriented, sustainable and cooperative manner in the subsequent implementation. As the opposition, we will pay just as much attention to a legitimate balance of interests and a fair distribution of costs as to adhering to the very ambitious schedule. If the federal government acts responsibly and prudently, Germany will remain a water-rich country in the future."

[Steffen Bilger](#), Deputy chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group: "It's good that Federal Environment Minister Lemke is finally bringing her water strategy to the cabinet. When it comes to concrete implementation, the Minister must now prove that she is also capable of a cooperative political style. It is important to protect municipal rights and interests just as much as those of the federal states. With all the justified priority for the public water supply, it is also important to maintain Germany as a strong production location - even in times of climate change."

**Andreas Bleck (AfD)** said: "For the reasonable distribution of water within Germany, however, long-distance water pipes must be built; Long-distance water pipelines that require energy to operate; Energy that isn't always there. In fact, the water issue in Germany is also an energy issue."

**Ralph Lenkert (DIE LINKE)** said that not only citizens and SMEs, but also large corporations like Tesla (which has faced criticism for water use at a gigafactory in Germany) should be forced to save water. He added that the richest 1 percent of humanity alone caused 20 percent of climate damage and proposed a wealth tax to help finance the water strategy.

## Stakeholders

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Political association of the CDU) [said](#) the Strategy's comprehensive, cross-departmental approach is to be welcomed, however, "Essential questions remain vague and require rapid, solution-oriented clarification involving all relevant stakeholders, especially at state and municipal level: For example, what are the priorities for implementation? How are the responsibilities regulated? What about the financing? What is the exact schedule for implementation and how is it monitored?"

German environmental organization Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND) has [called](#) on the German government to take responsibility for water protection both nationally and globally. The organization has pointed out that Germany's water footprint is enormous and that the effects of climate change, combined with regional water scarcity, are becoming increasingly noticeable in Germany. "The Federal Environment Agency estimates that Germany's daily consumption of water per capita is around 7,200 litres or 219 billion cubic meters per year. Only 14 percent of this water comes from Germany, while 86 percent comes from abroad."

The Bundesvereinigung der kommunalen Spitzenverbände (Association representing German cities, municipalities and counties) [supported](#) the goal of meeting current and future water challenges with an integrative approach. It states that the implementation of the measures proposed in the draft will require significant costs that must be distributed fairly across society. It also welcomes the commitment of the federal government to keep water supply and wastewater management as public tasks. Furthermore, it mentions that the municipal level must be strengthened to effectively implement individual measures. "It is necessary to provide sufficient financial resources for cities, districts, and municipalities to implement these measures." Finally, it welcomes the proposals for an extended producer responsibility in the EU's draft Municipal Wastewater Directive.

The German Association of Cities and Towns welcomed the Strategy. It highlights the need for additional inter-regional networks and pipelines to balance regional differences in water availability. It suggested that an investment acceleration law for municipal water management was needed to support these important infrastructure tasks. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of prioritizing public water supply over other users when there is not enough water for all users. Finally, it called for the implementation of the principle of producer responsibility in both European and national water law to avoid hazardous substances entering the water system.

The Verband Deutscher Mineralbrunnen (VDM), association of German wells, [supported](#) the strategy and its implementation. It said a national situation report on water use and transparency in all water withdrawals was necessary. Limiting the risks of water pollution by substance inputs (e.g., pharmaceuticals, pesticides, chemicals such as PFAS) was fundamentally important for protecting water resources, it said. In addition, groundwater replenishment must be promoted, and investments in water infrastructure must be accelerated.

WWF Germany, [welcomed](#) the strategy. It highlighted the importance of protecting bodies of water from nitrates from agricultural sources and good ecological conditions of rivers, lakes and coastal waters. It also emphasized that natural water retention must be strengthened.

The Deutsche Verein des Gas- und Wasserfaches und Deutsche Vereinigung für Wasserwirtschaft, Abwasser und Abfall, German association for gas and water and the



German association for water, wastewater and waste management, [welcomed](#) the National Water Strategy as an important step towards a sustainable and secure water supply. They emphasized that the goals of the strategy were commendable and its preventive approaches were logical. However, they also stressed that it was important to implement the strategy quickly and concretely.

The **Forum Wirtschaftsethik** [said](#) "The National Strategy is a good tool for seeing and discussing the big picture," but added, "The federal government's national water strategy should therefore be accompanied by a long-term scientific water research and development program that supports the gradual implementation of the strategy."

**Institute for Climate Protection, Energy and Mobility (IKEM)** [said](#) "The National Water Strategy represents an important step towards the development of climate-sensitive water management...Still, IKEM sees a need for improvement in some areas that fail to specify sufficiently concrete measures, provide information on the implementation or feasibility of these measures, and address the issue of financing."

**Deborah Bartel** is a political consultant on Dods German-language service covering environment

## About Dods Political Intelligence

Dods Political Intelligence provides political monitoring of France and Germany in their respective native language.

In France, the team covers the French Government, Parliament, Public Agencies, Political Parties, Unions, NGOs, and Think Tanks. In Germany, the team covers Bundestag, Bundesrat, Federal Ministries, Political Parties, Trade Associations, NGOs and Corporations.

## Contact Us

For further information and to book a free trial, please visit [dodspoliticalintelligence.com](https://dodspoliticalintelligence.com) or contact us at [customer.service@dodsgroup.com](mailto:customer.service@dodsgroup.com) +32 274 182 30