

Tackling water resilience in Europe – the practical and the political



Sue Arundale, Director General, EFCA.

Earlier this year at a time when a plethora of requests were being published for an initiative to solve the imminent water emergency, the European Commission abandoned the Water Resilience Initiative. EFCA was only one of the Federations that was dismayed by this move, which was purely political. Sensitive to the timing in the run up to the European elections and, significantly, the selection of European Commissioners, it seemed that the highest-ranking EU officials had rather lost their bottle.

Although a number of factors were probably at play – including some that are almost certainly related to growing pressure on the EU budget as a result of several military conflicts – one in particular is too close to the EU border to ignore. The sight of tractors blockading the EU quarter in Brussels along with the knowledge that farmers are railing against regulation that has an impact on them (and they are voters too), must have made even the most experienced EU leaders' determination falter.

Still, the decision was a step in the wrong direction. The call for solutions, under the umbrella of an EU "Blue Deal", is almost unanimous from interested federations and NGOs, albeit with the slightly different priorities according to the community that these organisations represent.

EFCA has been assured that the Water Resilience Initiative will come back. The draft text of the eventual communication is almost ready. The wranglings over which elected MEPs will get which leadership positions in the European Parliament Committees and the hearings (auditions) for the various candidate European Commissioners will all have to be settled first, so we expect that we might have to wait

until 2025. But it will come back and it must ... the water emergency is already here.

In this article Sue Arundale, Director, General EFCA, looks at what EFCA's priorities are and how the Federation has been highlighting the work of consulting engineers who have the solutions to some of the biggest challenges being faced.

Why have we got to this point?

Years of neglected water infrastructure by those responsible authorities, both for the basic delivery of fresh water and for the treatment of wastewater, have led to leaking supply pipes, depleting the already stretched clean water supply at alarming rates. The average loss in the EU is now a whopping 25%. Add to that the growing number of sewers blocked by fatbergs and other domestic and industrial waste, which can stop a district from functioning and create health hazards on top, and the conclusion is obvious. National governments and public and private authorities responsible for water have not allocated sufficient budgets to maintenance and repair. The cost of responding to an emergency and the associated collateral damage is surely far higher than that of scheduled, preventative maintenance. However, maintenance is not a headline grabber. So the political

will is at best lukewarm.

As if the neglect of man-made infrastructure was not enough, policy makers have been slow to react to the stress on nature's own infrastructure caused by the escalating climate emergency. The shocking climate disasters in Europe over the previous decade have caught us out, even though scientists have been predicting such violent events for decades.

The fact is though that solutions have been available for years. Working with nature, engineers are able to shore up natural defences, reinforce flood plains, re-direct water flow and design systems that can be activated when the water levels are low. Investment as a matter of urgency in such measures could prevent another summer of disruption to the transport of goods on the Rhine and for industrial production. It could also prevent another shut-down of nuclear power plants in France because of the unsustainably-low level of the same natural water source, which is essential for the cooling of the reactors.

Asking who is to blame will not move us forward. Having said that, water has historically been handled at national, regional and local level but it is very clearly a Europe-wide problem, with water courses crossing

borders. The solutions must now be co-ordinated at EU level under the umbrella of an EU Blue Deal.

Co-ordinate policy, mobilise expertise

EFCA's recent position on an EU Blue Deal urges the EU institutions to co-ordinate their combined actions under the new EU Environment Commissioner, with the eventual Vice-President of the European Commission with relevant co-ordination responsibilities for the Green Deal taking ultimate responsibility. Such co-ordination should bring in existing policy and regulation under this umbrella, without reinventing the wheel.

While acknowledging the wide scope of problems at economic, environmental and societal level, EFCA's position focuses on the engineering priorities and solutions. These are entirely compatible with the broad EU policy emphasis on renewable energy and the circular economy, the latter now needing to incorporate a circular water economy. Every drop of clean and wastewater must be saved, recycled and made available for human and industrial consumption.

The engineering expertise is available and ready to go. In a recent visit to the European Parliament, during which our Green Deal Committee Chair and EFCA Vice-President and I met a senior MEP, we were told not to ask for money. By this, we understood that we should not ask for a funding stream at EU level. However, EFCA is not asking for handouts for consulting engineers – we are asking for responsible public authorities to get their priorities right.

The private sector water companies must also act responsibly in this regard. This is no time for huge bonuses for senior management. This money must be used to pay



“
The shocking climate disasters in Europe over the previous decade have caught us out, even though scientists have been predicting such violent events for decades.

for available solutions. The kind of measures that are needed are not cheap, but they will save water, save lives, keep the economy running and keep society functioning. Can we really put a price on that?

EFCA Blue Deal conference

Appropriately located in one of the countries struggling the most with the climate emergency and the dangerous impact on water supply (alternately too much and too little), EFCA, with the host Tecniberia, welcomed its members and the consulting engineering community in Madrid during May of this year for a conference that was dedicated to water resilience.

With keynote speakers from the

European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee, the latter having ignited the debate around the Blue Deal last year, attendees participated in a programme focused on the nexus between water and energy, climate mitigation measures and how to address investment via effective public procurement. The focus was on innovation and quality in water infrastructure, and not simply the lowest price.

Engineers can solve emergency

Water desalination plants? ... these are energy intensive; Ocean turbines? ... these are quite expensive, hostile to the host environment, and not yet ready for wide application. However, they do offer huge potential. We now need to really think about harnessing hydropower, natural aquifers and using wastewater for energy production. Think nature-based solutions such as the shoring up of our flood plains, re-meandering rivers, and cross-border solutions to target local emergencies with co-ordinated technical systems. Nor should we ever forget the expertise long used in the low countries to protect their coastlines and inland zones that are below sea level.

Finally, we need to think about technical solutions needed to restore the effectiveness of water supply and sewerage systems. The common thread? ... engineering.

Without wishing to make readers depressed, the consequences of not taking action are unthinkable and the time is now – as soon as the post-election shuffling of people and positions has finished. EFCA will continue to talk about the Blue Deal and is nurturing its partnerships with other federations and NGOs at EU level to ensure that any action is co-ordinated and the pressure maintained. ■