

WRITTEN QUESTION E-2824/04
by Bart Staes (Verts/ALE)
to the Commission

Subject: Polluted sediment in lake and riverbeds in the European Union

The pollution of sediment in pond, lake and riverbeds will be one of the greatest challenges facing environmental policy in the next few years. In Flanders, approximately half the riverbeds are polluted or heavily polluted (www.vmm.be/waterbodem). This places a huge strain on efforts to clean up water resources. The situation is similar in the Netherlands. The pollution of river beds is often a cross-border problem and pollution sometimes represents risks to public health. Pollution frequently crosses borders creating problems as to who is responsible and can be held liable.

Article 16(7) of the framework water directive 2000/60/EC¹ requires the Commission to propose quality standards for sediments.

1. Have the quality standards referred to in Article 16(7) of the framework water directive already been drawn up?
2. Can the Commission provide a review of waterbed pollution throughout the European Union?
3. Can the Commission say whether it plans an action programme to clean up polluted waterbeds, given that this is often a cross-border problem?

E-2824/04EN

Answer given by Mr Dimas
on behalf of the Commission
(4.1.2005)

The Commission is aware that polluted sediments are a problem for water quality across the EU. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive overview from current monitoring data in the Member States yet. The most extensive set of monitoring data on pollutants in aquatic sediments of rivers was collected in the context of the Commps project² (combined monitoring-based and modelling-based priority setting). More than 68 000 individual monitoring results from 10 Member States for 221 different pollutants have been collected by the Commission. Based on this compilation, several substances (e.g. brominated diphenylethers or flame retardants) which are particularly polluting sediments have been included in the list of priority substances under the Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC³. The list was finally established by Decision No 2455/2001/EC⁴.

Currently, the Commission is preparing a proposal to set environmental quality standards for the priority substances in accordance with Article 16 (7) of Directive 2000/60/EC. It is expected to come

¹ OJ L 327, 22.12.2000, p. 1.

² http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/water/water-framework/preparation_priority_list.htm

³ Directive 2000/60/EC of the parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000 establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy

⁴ Decision No 2455/2001/EC of the Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2001 establishing the list of priority substances in the field of water policy and amending Directive 2000/60/EC, OJ L 331, 15.12.2001

forward with such a proposal in the first half of 2005. However, the consultation of experts in preparation of the proposal concluded that it is currently not possible to set quality standards for sediments since the considerable lack of ecotoxicity data for benthic organisms (i.e. fauna living in the sediment) and the scientific uncertainties in relation to the exposure as part of the risk assessment in sediments.

On this basis, the current position of the Commission is that it will be left to the Member States to identify sediments where remedial action is needed on the basis of the results from the ecological monitoring under the Water Framework Directive. Benthic organisms are one quality element to determine the “good ecological status” under the Directive. If the sediment quality is too poor to achieve “good ecological status”, Member States are required to initiate appropriate actions in line with Articles 4 and 11 of the Directive. This applies also to cross-border pollution from sediments, since such measures need to be coordinated in an international river basin management plan as set out by Article 13.

Irrespectively of these effective provisions under the Water Framework Directive to enable the Member States to tackle the pollution of sediments, the Commission will continue its efforts to overcome the lack of knowledge on sediment quality in the EU. To this end, the Commission will continue discussions with the European Environment Agency to overcome this deficit. In addition, the Commission will consider whether an appropriate research project in the action on support for policy under the 6th Framework Programme may be another possibility to address this issue. In that respect the research projects carried out in the context of the European Sediment Research Network (SedNet¹) activities have been very valuable.

¹ <http://www.sednet.org>