

Side event – UN 2023 Water Conference:

Circular Economy – a key component of water-smart societies for a water-resilient world

23 March 2023, 08:00 - 09:15, Interactive Dialogue Room (CR4), UN HQ

Co-hosted by the European Union, the Government of Peru, the Government of South Africa Department of Water and Sanitation, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Water Europe

Background:

During the past century, a resource-intensive, fossil fuelled, linear economy has been the paradigm for a development model based exclusively on economic growth and externalized costs for the environment and society. This unsustainable model is at the root of our triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. And it has a major water footprint which must be addressed in view of the accelerating global water crisis.

According to the International Resource Panel, 90% of water stress is due to the extraction, cultivation and processing of material resources – biomass/food, minerals, metals, and fossil fuels. According to the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), agriculture accounts for (on average) 70% of all freshwater withdrawals globally¹, followed by water use for industry and energy production, and public water supply.

The scientific and political consensus is that transitioning towards a circular and resource-efficient economy offers the best alternative to deal with our current unsustainable consumption of resources. Water is no exception. When looking at water specifically, transitioning towards a circular economy means to rethink our production and consumption not only in the water sector itself (e.g. waste water treatment facilities, drinking water supply) but across water-dependent sectors – which encompasses first and foremost food, energy, and fashion production but also construction and mining. This transition is part of a water-resilient world that we aim to achieve together globally, building water-smart societies in which the value of water is recognised and realised to ensure water security, sustainability and resilience, and all available water sources are managed so that water scarcity and pollution is avoided; water and resource loops are largely closed to foster a circular economy and optimal resource efficiency; the water system is resilient against the impact of climate and demographic change, and all relevant stakeholders are engaged to guarantee sustainable water governance.

Partnerships are also a key aspect of this transition. They can take many different forms and shapes. The European Union supports close collaboration with public and private institutions, government, civil society, and academia to develop, validate, and scale-up innovations that embrace new technologies, governance, business models, and advancing innovative policies to achieve a water-resilient world.

Businesses, consumers and public authorities in the EU and globally are already focusing on increasing the sustainability and circularity of consumption and production, but the transition is slow and the environmental, water and climate footprint of these sectors remains high. In fact, global demand for freshwater could exceed viable resources by 40% by 2030 if no action is taken to move from business as usual, according to the Water Resources Group.

¹ Agriculture includes water used for irrigation but also water used for livestock and aquaculture. The shares of freshwater withdrawals per sector can vary greatly among countries.

In order to accelerate this transition, we need not only to reduce, reuse, recycle, and rethink the entire life-cycle from product design to end-of-life but also to strengthen collaborative actions along the full value-chain of the water ecosystem, including public, private, civil society organizations and academia. Innovative solutions, and a systemic and science-based approach are required for large-scale impact at water basin level while empowering consumers to tackle the water and resource impacts of the world's production and consumption. The circular economy is one of the keys for water-smart economic models and societies that value water as a source of opportunity.

Event details:

The objective of the event is to provide a visible platform to public, private, scientific, intergovernmental and civil society organizations to showcase coordinated and innovative actions and voluntary commitments to the Water Action Agenda to demonstrate the potential of “going circular” for reducing the water footprint and to promote sustainable consumption and production.

Through an exchange of practices, high level speakers will be able to illustrate how the transition can be accelerated by policy-oriented research, public policy frameworks encouraging circularity, innovative business models and technologies, and cross-sectoral partnerships. The audience will get a better understanding of the different contributions and solutions from science, policy, corporates and civil society to revalue water in the circular economy, in line with Interactive Dialogue 2: Water for Sustainable Development: Valuing Water, Water-Energy-Food Nexus and Sustainable Economic and Urban Development (SDG 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and SDGs 2, 8, 9, 11, 12).

The event will take place in the UN Headquarters in New York in the context of the **UN 2023 Water Conference**. The event is organised by the European Union, the Government of Peru, the Government of South Africa, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), including the Global Alliance on Circular Economy and Resource Efficiency (GACERE), and Water Europe.

Programme and speakers:

Introduction – 2 min – moderator: Astrid Schomaker, Director, European Commission

Video message – 5 min – Ursula von der Leyen, President, European Commission

Scene setter – 10 min – Izabella Teixeira, Co-Chair of the International Resource Panel (TBC)

Panel – 55 min – moderator: Hans Goossens, President of Water Europe/ CEO of De Watergroep

Guiding questions: Which are the socioeconomic opportunities of going circular towards a water-resilient world? Which are the best policy and partnership tools for going circular towards a water-resilient world?

- Florika Fink-Hooijer, Director-General for Environment, European Commission
- Estelle Brachlianoff, CEO of Veolia
- Sean Phillips, Director-General of Water and Sanitation, Government of South Africa
- Hania Pérez de Cuéllar, Minister of Housing, Construction and Sanitation, Government of Peru
- Christophe Beck, CEO of Ecolab, (TBC)
- Ligia Noronha, Assistant Secretary- General, Head UNEP New York Office, UN Environment Programme

Conclusions and wrap up – 3 min – Astrid Schomaker, Director, European Commission

Event specifics:

- Lead organisation: DG Environment, European Commission
- Date: Thursday 23 March 2023, during the UN 2023 Water Conference
- Venue: UN Headquarters, New York, Interactive Dialogue Room (CR4)
- Time and duration: 08:00 - 09:15 EST (75 minutes)
- Target Audience: decision-makers, and private and civil society stakeholders attending UN conference