



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA  
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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### **Follow up to the consultation process under the Protocol on Water and Health**

Dear Ms Algayerova,

We would like to thank UNECE for the support in carrying out the Consultation Process under the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe – World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe Protocol on Water and Health („Protocol“).

Estonia as a party to the Protocol has participated in all the reporting exercises of the Protocol since its ratification in 2003. At the same time, Estonia as a member of the European Union has the obligation to implement EU policies and legislation. The Consultation Process has been a useful tool to better understand the interactions between the Protocol and the EU legislation, how to incorporate the principles of both instruments into our legislation and to ensure implementation.

In Estonia, the responsibilities concerning drinking water and sanitation are divided between the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Social Affairs. According to the data from the year 2018, approximately 87% of the population has access to a drinking water supply system in Estonia. This is a remarkable achievement taking into account the low population density. However, due to large number of small water supply systems, it has been a challenge to find optimal solutions to further increase the total number of persons who are supplied with safe drinking water and sanitation. 98% of all suppliers in Estonia are small scale water systems and they serve approximately 40 % of the population.

Targets to tackle the aforementioned challenges were developed in the framework of the National Environmental Strategy, the Water Management Plans and the National Health Plan 2009-2020. These strategies are adopted by the Estonian Government and same targets were set as the targets of the Protocol.

Between November 2017 and November 2018 Estonia took part in the Consultation Process organised by the Compliance Committee of the Protocol. During this process we had extensive national discussions between different authorities and stakeholders in our country.

In the course of the consultations, the Committee held plenary and individual discussions with the Parties on the situation of water and health in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and on our needs and expectations from the process. The Committee identified specific challenges faced by each country and also a number of cross-cutting priorities, namely the target-setting process under the Protocol and its relation to the implementation of the European Union legislation, small-scale water supply and sanitation systems, the organizational structure at the domestic level and financing.

Accordingly, the Committee provided an advice regarding the common needs and expectations of the three Baltic states, for which we provide information on the implementation of the specific advice below.

## **1. Relationship between the Protocol on Water and Health and the relevant European Union instruments**

A significant benefit of participating in the Protocol activities is that it offers a platform for exchanging experience and learning among countries. European law instruments are means that States Parties to the Protocol, which are also Members of the European Union, may choose as part of their discretion in the selection of means to implement their obligations under the Protocol or to adopt measures that are more stringent than the latter. Also, such Parties to the Protocol are entitled to adopt domestic measures that are more stringent than the standards arising from European law instruments. One of the targets Estonia has set under the Protocol is increasing the total number of persons who are supplied with safe drinking water (coming from the public water supply system). This target was set in the National Health Plan 2009-2020 and also in the Water Management Plans 2015-2021. At present, a new National Health Plan 2020-2030 has been developed and is in the process to be approved by the Government. In the new health plan, we have raised the level of ambition, setting as a priority the increase of the total number of persons who are supplied with safe drinking water from the public water supply systems and also individual systems. More detailed targets will be set in the action programs under the National Health Plan. This target goes beyond the EU requirements and is also in line with the targets of the Protocol.

## **2. Relying on the Protocol to raise awareness among policy-makers and consumers, ensuring involvement of the general public and fundraising for targets set in the country.**

In 2018, as part of developing the National Health Plan 2020-2030, extensive public consultations were held among different ministries and other stakeholders, including national health and water authorities, NGOs and representatives of civil society. All the participants were encouraged to take part in the discussions and formulations of the target setting process, including drinking water and health. In addition, the Water Management Plan 2021-2027, which also sets targets for the Protocol is underway. Public consultations all around different parts of Estonia are ongoing and the new management plans will be updated by 2021 December at the latest. Furthermore, The Estonian National Strategy on Sustainable Development "Sustainable Estonia 21" covers the SDG-s, which different ministries are responsible for. Since May 2006, the implementation of the strategic development plans for sustainable development are coordinated by the Government Office. As the Protocol provides a sound approach, experience and a regional platform to implement the Sustainable Development Goals pertinent to water, sanitation and health, the work of the Government Office is bringing the Protocol to the attention of high-level decision-makers. Some examples of educational campaigns, publication of information and raising awareness to further strengthen stakeholder engagement include the following:

- In 2019, a campaign called „Clean hands“ was conducted among pupils in first grades, which educated them to clean their hands properly and ensure adequate hygiene.
- As we are updating the website of the Ministry, it is planned to add information and guidance materials of the Protocol to the drinking water and health section of the website.
- With the help of the WHO, we are discussing the possibilities to have an awareness raising workshop on the implementation of the WHO water safety plan (WSP) approach as a tool that supports water suppliers in assessing the risks to water quality and managing them appropriately.

## **3. Financial instruments and mechanisms to implement targets under the Protocol, with a particular focus on small-scale and individual water supply systems**

In the new National Health Plan 2020-2030, a priority will be to increase the total number of persons who are supplied with safe drinking water from the public water supply systems and also individual systems. Activities supporting small-scale and individual water supply systems are already ongoing, some examples are as follows:

- Environmental Investment Center accession measures: individuals can apply for financial support for connection to public water supply and sewerage in sewage collection areas with a pollution load of more than 2000 population equivalent (p.e.). A support measure is under preparation, whereby support could be requested for joining the public water supply and sewerage in wastewater catchment areas with less than 2000 p.e. 2291 projects have been funded through the public water supply and sewerage accession measure for 6.4 million euros, which has ensured 4540 people with public water supply and sewerage service. The goal is to provide in total 17 000 people with public water supply and sewerage services by the end of 2023.

- In addition to the EU Structural Funds, there is a national environmental program, with a total amount of 128 million euros allocated to water management in 2011-2019. Funding for water management infrastructure from the environmental program will continue, but there are also changes in the annual volume of grants and in the areas supported. The program focuses on ensuring sustainable management of water infrastructure.

- The project of the individual water works is ongoing covering 1000 individual waterworks all over Estonia. The purpose of the study is to have an overview of the drinking water quality in the individual supply systems, which are not under regular surveillance. The owners of the individual supplies will have the results of the analyses and also informational sheets on how to take care of the systems to prevent water related diseases. The project end date is 2020 May.

- Every year, people with individual supply systems have an opportunity to apply for funds from the national „Sparsely populated areas programme“, which covers the reconstruction and construction of new wells.

#### **4. Capacity building for water suppliers and municipalities, with a special focus on risk assessment of water supply systems**

Estonia has evaluated the needs of capacity building for both large and small-scale water operators in the 2019 study „Future view for the needs of labour and skills (*the OSKA study*): Water and waste management and the environment“. OSKA study in the field of water and waste management and environment was seeking how to better respond to the need for labour and skills in key occupations in the sector in the perspective of 5-10 years and how the offer of training opportunities should be modified for this purpose. Within the framework of the project, potential future developments in the field were analysed, the labour needs of the main professions were assessed, and how the content of training should be changed so that the skills of workers match the needs of the labour market. According to the study, 45% of water management workers are over 55 years old. As there are very few young people working in water companies, the sector is experiencing a severe problem of growth. The problem is most acute with water treatment operators, half of whom are over 50 years old. 69% of the employees of water companies are male.

Acknowledging challenges related to human resources, the Estonian Water Works Association (EVEL) in cooperation with the Järvamaa Vocational Education Center launched the two-year workplace-based study program “Water Operator” already in 2017. The curriculum concerns the training of both drinking water and sewage treatment plant operators. In the same year, 24 students from the first flight started their studies. In autumn 2018, the second flight was followed. After 2 years of study, the curriculum is completed by a professional examination and a certificate of professional qualification “Water Management

Operator, Level 5". Hopefully, this course will continue to be successful and popular in the coming years.

Training activities are also planned in the Program of Measures under the Water Management Plans for the period 2015-2021 to train operators of wastewater treatment plant and to ensure the efficiency of wastewater treatment plants.

## **5. Institutional set up for implementing the Protocol**

We already have an existing and well performing inter-ministerial mechanism in place under the National Health Plan, which brings together different actors in the field of water and health and is also used as a platform to strengthen the implementation of the Protocol.

## **6. Enforcement of the targets set under the Protocol**

Both, the National Health Plan and the Water Management Plans, wherein targets are set for the implementation of the Protocol, are national strategies adopted by the Government, which ensures high level political involvement and implementation of the targets at the highest political level.

## **7. Consolidation of water companies – achieving the long-term water management sustainability (Estonia)**

The strategy for the consolidation of water companies will be developed in cooperation with the OECD in the framework of the Structural Reform Support Program 2017-2020. The following milestones have been agreed:

- a. Mapping of possible options for consolidation – November 2020
- b. Consolidation Strategies and Reform Action Plan approved – September 2021

We are very grateful for having the opportunity to take part in the Consultation Process and for the Interpretative Note. It has contributed to better understanding about the provisions of the Protocol, strengthened the cooperation between our national stakeholders and paved the way for a stronger and more effective implementation of the Protocol.

Yours sincerely,



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Deputy Secretary General on Health

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