Failure to Enforce EU Law is Giving the Green Light to Hydropower in Europe

The story in numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>ALL of Europe</th>
<th>EU Countries</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existing Plants</td>
<td>21,387</td>
<td>19,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Construction</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
<td>8,507</td>
<td>5,734</td>
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</tbody>
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Citizens want to see the EU water law enforced

With more than 4,000 existing plants, Austria is one of the top three countries with the most hydropower. Despite this, it continues to invest in it - 100+ plants are on the cards. A recent study found that not even a third of the permits authorising new hydropower plants were in line with the non-deterioration principle of the EU Water Framework Directive.

Strong law, weak enforcement

EU governments can exempt a specific water body from meeting the Water Framework Directive’s objective - this must be in exceptional cases only. But exceptions have become the rule. Of the water bodies in the EU:

- 60% are not healthy
- 53% are under exemption

This includes exemptions to allow new hydropower developments to go ahead.

Did you know?

- Hydropower dams trap sediments that protect riverbanks and deltas against floods and sea level rises.
- They release methane and CO₂ from their reservoirs and are therefore not climate neutral.
- They destroy rivers and block fish migration routes, seriously contributing to the loss in freshwater biodiversity.
- They rely on a healthy supply of water. With droughts and water scarcity on the rise, it is not a climate resilient source of energy.

3. #ProtectWater campaign, www.livingrivers.eu
4. WWF Austria, ÖKOBÜRO, 2018. Umsetzung des Verschlechterungsverbots gemäß EU-Wasserrahmenrichtlinie in Österreich im Bereich Wasserkraft
In the EU, these areas are protected under the EU Birds and Habitats Directive and EU Water Framework Directive. The story in numbers:

- **3,936** existing hydropower plants in protected areas
- **77** under construction
- **2,396** planned in protected areas

Protected on paper, not in practice:

Protected areas offer a safe haven to Europe’s most valuable and threatened biodiversity. These laws are being broken. Governments are continuing to destroy these habitats with hydropower.

In the EU, these areas are 28% of planned hydropower is in Europe’s protected areas.

Big risk, small gain:

Built in 1999 in Spain’s Sierra de Castril Natural Park, the El Portillo dam was initially part of plans to develop a water transfer project. Despite mounting evidence that the dam was destroying stocks of the endangered southern brown trout, a small hydropower plant was built below the dam, putting the species at even greater risk - and all for a miniscule 1.8 MW of electricity. 91% of all planned and existing hydropower in Europe is small and produces very little electricity.

Spotlight on Romania:

The Jiu River houses 1,142 different species, around 200 of which are protected. Since 2003, there have been plans to build a medium-sized hydropower plant, although the area is a Natura 2000 site. The project would divert 85% of the water, resulting in biodiversity loss and destruction to the surrounding national park.

Species in focus:

**Sternula Albifrons**

The little tern is protected under the EU Birds Directive. Its habitat along Croatia’s Drava River, mainly gravel and sand bars protected under Natura 2000, has been degraded by the construction of hydropower. Because of this, only breeding pairs on average remain on the Drava, with the last breeding spots squeezed along the last free-flowing 50km stretch.

4,000+ plants planned for the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean:

- The Balkans alone hold some of the healthiest rivers in Europe and many vulnerable species.
- 30% of rivers here are "pristine" with no signs of pollutants.
- 50% are in very good health.