

RIWA-Rijn: permitting must better protect the Rhine as a source of drinking water

The water quality of the Rhine requires continued attention and further efforts to reduce the burden of harmful substances. This is one of the conclusions of RIWA-Rijn's Annual Report 2025, published today. Permitting industrial discharges is the first and most important line of defence. It is precisely here that RIWA-Rijn sees shortcomings.

For five million people in the Netherlands, the Rhine is an important source of drinking water. In 2025, 86 measured parameters exceeded the target values of the European River Memorandum on one or more occasions. The calculated Removal Requirement Index and progress towards the 30% reduction target show that further efforts remain necessary to achieve a structural reduction in the pollution burden on the Rhine.

Dutch tap water is safe and reliable. Drinking water suppliers continuously monitor water quality and treat river water where necessary. However, it is far more effective to prevent substances that are difficult to remove from entering the Rhine in the first place than to remove them later during drinking water treatment.

For this reason, RIWA-Rijn is scrutinising permitting procedures for new industrial activities in the German part of the Rhine river basin increasingly closely. According to RIWA-Rijn, experience with these procedures shows that protection of the drinking water source falls short in several respects.

"A permit application is the key moment at which new pollution can be prevented," says Gerard Stroomberg, Director of RIWA-Rijn. "Once an activity has been authorised, it becomes much more difficult to limit its impact on the Rhine afterwards."

Permitting an industrial activity is one thing; assessing its impact on the Rhine is another

RIWA-Rijn observes that a new industrial activity can be authorised before it is fully clear which substances will ultimately enter the river via the wastewater, what their effects will be and which limits should apply to them.

This is particularly relevant when a company sends its wastewater to a central wastewater treatment plant at an industrial or chemical park. The company may already be granted permission to begin its industrial activities while the water permit for the final discharge of the wastewater into surface waters has yet to be applied for.

In RIWA-Rijn's view, these individual permitting steps should not be assessed in isolation. The industrial activity, wastewater treatment and final discharge form a single chain and should therefore be assessed and permitted in an integrated manner.

The absence of European water quality standards or applicable Best Available Techniques (BAT) conclusions may also result in no emission limit values being set for new and emerging substances. RIWA-Rijn sees lithium and new PFAS compounds as examples.

Note to the editor (not for publication)

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Participation in permitting procedures is unnecessarily difficult

In practice, it is also difficult to follow permitting procedures in the Rhine river basin. Applications are available for public inspection for only a few weeks, and the files are not available online. RIWA-Rijn representatives have to travel to the offices of the relevant German permitting and water authorities to inspect paper files on site. Parts of the files are unavailable because they may contain commercially sensitive information.

This makes it difficult to assess, fully and in good time, what new industrial activities may mean for water quality and drinking water suppliers hundreds of kilometres downstream.

According to RIWA-Rijn, this creates an uneven playing field: the consequences for the Dutch drinking water source must be assessed, yet the information needed to carry out that assessment is not always easily or fully accessible. In football terms: a clean Rhine is already 3–0 down before the match has properly begun.

RIWA-Rijn: make source protection the starting point

RIWA-Rijn therefore calls for a permitting system in which the impact on water quality and drinking water supply is taken fully into account from the outset. This means assessing the industrial activity, wastewater treatment and final discharge together in terms of their impact on the river.

In addition, permit applications and relevant environmental information throughout the Rhine river basin should be made available in a timely manner through a centralised digital system, enabling stakeholders to form a well-founded view and, where necessary, submit an informed response.

“What is not discharged into the Rhine upstream does not have to be removed again downstream,” says Stroomberg. “Sound and comprehensive permitting is therefore an essential instrument for protecting the Rhine as our source of drinking water.”

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Web links

The latest RIWA-Rijn Annual Report, covering 2025, can be downloaded here:

<https://www.riwa-rijn-publicaties.nl/NL/jaarrapporten/RIWA-2026-NL-Jaarrapport-2025-De-Rijn.pdf>

Note: an English version of the RIWA-Rijn Annual Report will be published in early October.

About RIWA-Rijn: In the Netherlands, 5 million people depend on the Rhine for their drinking water. RIWA-Rijn, the Association of River Water Companies, is a knowledge centre and representative body for its affiliated drinking water companies in the Dutch Rhine river basin. RIWA-Rijn works nationally and internationally to achieve good Rhine water quality so that clean and healthy drinking water can be produced using natural, simple treatment methods. RIWA-Rijn develops, gathers and shares knowledge throughout the Rhine river basin and Europe in order to achieve this goal. Through the International Association of Waterworks in the Rhine Catchment Area (IAWR), RIWA-Rijn works together with 120 drinking water companies from six Rhine riparian states: Germany, France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria and the Netherlands.

<https://www.riwa-rijn.org>

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