



European Commission

DEPOLLUTION & DECARBONISATION PRIORITIES

AIR, CLIMATE, WATER AND SOIL IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



When a country seeks to join the European Union (EU) it has to align its legislation with EU law, or what is also known as the EU acquis. Among its 35 chapters, chapter 27 on “Environment and Climate Change” is the largest, with more than 200 legislative acts on air quality, waste management, water management, nature protection, industrial pollution, chemicals and noise.

Assessing the status of air, water and soil together with climate in the Western Balkans accurately is therefore key to benchmark progress during the accession process and to provide indicators on environmental status to inform the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans which takes into account the principles of the EU Green Deal and is embedded in the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. The European Commission’s Joint Research Centre has published a report that outlines the current status which is summarised below.



The Western Balkans is an area of 218,750 km² located at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula and next to the Adriatic Sea.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence, as on the official website of the European Union.

STATUS



Air

- Air quality is still critical
- Pollution is increasing in many areas
- Mortality attributed to air pollution is more than twice as high as the EU 27 average
- PM_{2.5} is the main pollutant to reduce, due to its dominant impact on mortality
- The energy sector, in particular coal-fuelled power plants, is the major source of SO₂ emissions and is an important PM_{2.5} contributor



Climate

- Extreme heat waves have doubled in magnitude over the last two decades compared to the period 1981-2000
- The frequency of heat waves has tripled in the same period
- Being the main CO₂ emitter, the energy sector offers a unique opportunity for air quality and climate co-benefits



Water

- 45% of water bodies assessed failed to reach a good status
- 54% aquatic ecosystems, particularly large fluvial rivers, are under considerable anthropogenic pressure
- A substantial effort is still needed in order to establish fully functioning water management practices



Soil

- Degradation is prevalent and extensive
- Erosion is the most significant type of degradation, followed by soil pollution
- Unsustainable land management practices and natural causes of soil degradation in the region are interlinked

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Embracing all the policies: Cross-cut priorities

For all environmental matrices considered in the report it is recommended to establish monitoring networks with sufficient data coverage in space and time, as well as a set of analysed parameters to reflect EU legislative requirements.

In order to facilitate progress on implementation of EU environmental legislation it is recommended to improve the integration of environmental measures for key policy areas like energy, transportation, industry, agriculture, etc.

Considering the transboundary nature of pollution, it is recommended to keep in mind existing international agreements (e.g. Air Convention) and good practices (e.g. those of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River and the International Sava River Basin Commission) and further develop interregional initiatives and institutions (e.g. Regional Cooperation Council).



Air and Climate

While significant improvement was made in recent years to align the climate and greenhouse gas emissions monitoring and reporting legislation with the EU acquis, implementation of the adopted legislation needs further strengthening.

The integration of environmental measures into energy production, energy efficiency, industry and transport (including maritime) policies is recommended.

The increase in intensity and frequency of heat waves over the latest decades demonstrates how the Western Balkans

too are affected by climate change and it is therefore recommended to develop an alert system for ozone episodes and heatwaves, involving sanitary authorities and meteorological forecast systems.

To take advantage of a renewable energy source like biomass and reduce the exposure to air pollutants as much as possible, it is recommended to ensure that best available technologies and practices are deployed for the operation of residential heating systems using this kind of fuel.

Water



To protect waterbodies a concerted effort is recommended, in relation to put in place an environmental monitoring plan for chemical and ecological status, a program of the protection areas, biodiversity and the status of hydrogeological degradation.

To optimise the setup of networks and implement well designed surveillance schemes it is considered a key action to modernise water monitoring in the short term.

Continued close scientific research cooperation with Member States is recommended for the establishment of effective water management practices in the Western Balkans; to succeed the improvement of the water bodies; and to move towards the Green Deal. Indeed experience from neighbouring MS in the development of typology and waterbody delineation, as well as development of assessment systems and monitoring practice can catalyse the process.

In addition, further investments in waste water collection and treatment

are recommended in this region. The implementation of the EU Regulation (EU 2020/741) on water re-use is of particular importance in Western Balkans due to growing water needs on the one hand, and the general lack of available water on the other, especially in view of the expected negative impact of climate change on the Western Balkans region.

Soil



To achieve the EU Soil Strategy objective of having all soils in the EU in a healthy condition by 2050 it is recommended to integrate the sustainable use of soils across all relevant EU policies, be it agriculture, biodiversity, circular economy, climate, urban development, or pollution. Coherent action across a broad policy base is also recommended for the implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. A key element in this regard would be the identification and adoption of less intensive agricultural practices, in line with the targets of the Farm2Fork Strategy.

It is recommended to put in place a targeted programme to support the implementation of 'light-houses' and living labs in the Western Balkans e.g. through links with the Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe'.

It is recommended that the EU Soil Observatory, together with the European Environment Agency, establishes a roadmap for an integrated soil monitoring and indicator framework to collect data to feed a soil dashboard that assesses the effectiveness of policies.

It is recommended to adopt a new Soil Health Law to give soils the same EU-wide legal basis as air and water.

FIND OUT MORE: [HTTPS://PUBLICATIONS.JRC.EC.EUROPA.EU/REPOSITORY/HANDLE/JRC129172](https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC129172)

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