

Drinking Water Decontamination: Strategies and Funding Options

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SUMMARY

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[1] In 2024, just over 29 per cent of the French population was exposed to the presence in water intended for human consumption (EDCH) of pesticides or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) – man-made chemical pollutants – at concentrations exceeding European quality limits. **Situations requiring restrictions on the consumption of tap water for health reasons remained rare in 2024 (fewer than 2,000 people affected).** However, the persistent nature and continued use of certain molecules, as well as the expanding range of substances detected or regulated, give cause for concern that non-compliance with drinking water standards will increase in the coming years.

[2] In a terms of reference letter dated 10 September 2025, the Minister for Ecological Transition, Biodiversity, Forests, the Sea and Fisheries (MTE), the Minister for Health and Access to Healthcare (MinSan), the Minister for the Economy and Finance (MinEfi) and the Minister for Agriculture, Agri-Food and Food Sovereignty (MAASA) commissioned the IGEDD, the IGAS, the IGF and the CGAAER to carry out a study on the financing of the decontamination of water intended for human consumption (EDCH). The aim of this assignment was to produce plausible scenarios for the roll-out of water treatment and to propose associated funding solutions. The bodies tasked with the assignment produced two separate reports; this report was drawn up by inspectors from the CGAAER, the IGAS and the IGEDD.

[3] **In accordance with the terms of reference, this report focuses primarily on the decontamination of water intended for human consumption and on the protection of the water resources that supply it.** The task force

considered that the more general reduction of pollution linked to PFAS and pesticides in the environment was the subject of broader, cross-cutting public policies (including the interministerial PFAS plan and the 'Ecophyto' plans). Adopting a 'One Health' approach¹, it considers it essential that other complementary measures be implemented alongside water remediation

to **tackle the problem at source and fully protect** the public and the environment.

[4] The detection in drinking water of the diffuse presence of new types of highly persistent chemical micropollutants (pesticide metabolites, PFAS) is making it increasingly difficult to comply with European quality limits, particularly in certain regions of northern and eastern France. **It highlights the limitations of current policies aimed at preserving the raw water quality.**

[5] **The vast majority of current instances where drinking water quality limits are exceeded stem from the past use of pollutants that are now banned.** This historical pollution can only be resolved through remedial measures (water treatment, interconnections).

this reason, the continued use of similar substances that are still authorised requires, in parallel, a strengthening of and better planning for preventive measures.

[6] **This situation is a cause for concern for public health (chronic exposure and 'cocktail' effects); it jeopardises access to water (closure of water abstraction points) and undermines public confidence in drinking water as well as placing a strain on public finances.** According to an estimate cited by the French Office for Biodiversity in a forthcoming study, the cost of treating drinking water to remove contaminants, particularly pesticides and PFAS, amounts to around 750 million euros per year. **The current funding model is tending to shift towards a 'polluter pays' approach, in which consumers of drinking water**

¹ A holistic approach that recognises that the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants and the environment are closely interlinked.

pay not only for the service but also for the consequences of pollution that they do not directly cause.

[7] In this context, the public drinking water service is undermined by **structural under-investment and a funding model that is insufficiently covered by water prices, by the limited application of the ‘polluter pays’ principle, and by restricted regional solidarity.**

[8] Local authorities are responsible for supplying high-quality water to the public. **The fragmentation of services deprives the smallest local authorities of the critical mass needed to take action, leading to numerous delays in investment** (estimated by the Cercle français de l’eau at around 4 billion euros per year for drinking water and sanitation). Out of an annual budget of 2.4 billion euros, the water agencies allocate €171 million to investment grants for drinking water production infrastructure in local authorities, **of which only €33 million is allocated to treatment infrastructure², with very significant disparities between the water agencies.**

[9] According to the SISE-Eaux database, between 2012 and 2025, the proportion of raw water requiring only simple treatment (dilution, simple physical treatments or disinfection) fell from 51 per cent to 46.6 per cent. **Around 1,000 drinking water production plants** (5 per cent of plants supplying 37.3 per cent of water) **are equipped with advanced treatment including polishing (using activated carbon or ultrafiltration) to combat chemical pollution. Only a few plants are equipped with low-pressure reverse osmosis to remove PFAS contamination.**

[10] The task force chose to operate within the framework of a dual requirement: to respect the current model of role allocation amongst stakeholders; and to seek proportionate and financially sustainable strategies.

[11] A review of the available levers has highlighted their diversity, as they fall under different sectoral public policies, and the necessary complementarity of preventive and remedial actions. **It is essential to move away from ways of thinking that pit preventive and remedial approaches against one another.** Comparing the costs of these two approaches as if one could replace the other is not relevant. **In the current situation, where it is necessary to tackle both past and ongoing pollution, neither of these approaches can stand alone any longer.**

[12] The task force recommends adopting an approach combining:

- **Generic marketing bans** and restrictions on the use of substances with an unfavourable risk-benefit ratio;
- Early or, *at the very least, minimum* **reductions in emissions at source** within catchment areas, whether from industrial, agricultural, urban or domestic discharges, for authorised substances that could one day reach excessively high concentrations in drinking water bodies or prove problematic for human health;
- **Measures to protect or restore water catchments**, provided that the resource remains available in the medium and long term;
- **Substitute, dilution or interconnection solutions** to provide alternatives to those responsible for water production and distribution (PRPDE) who are most at risk or in the most isolated areas;
- **Temporary remedial** measures in cases of pollution linked to substances that are already banned and present in the environment, but whose levels are expected to decrease;
- And where necessary, **sustainable**, strategically located and interconnected **treatment plants** to treat pollution which, despite all these preventative efforts, may still continue to be released as a result of human activities.

² Source: report provided by the Directorate for Water and Biodiversity

[13] This combination must be understood in a **clear order of priority: preventing the degradation of resources that are still intact, reducing pollution flows where possible, and reserving major remedial measures for situations where they have become essential**. A key challenge is therefore to better coordinate and break down the silos between these policies at the various territorial levels in order to explore all possible cost-effective solutions.

[14] To this end, the task force proposes **a new approach to anticipation, assessment and intervention in order to better protect drinking water and water resources**. This is based on a multi-criteria analysis, with the aim of guiding local authorities towards a combination of tailored to each specific pollution scenario. It situates projects within a local framework, thereby enabling the rationalisation of the necessary investments.

[15] The task force thus sets out a body of recommendations to develop:

- **national and local governance** (strengthened interministerial coordination, planning of actions at sub-basin level by local water committees within the framework of water development and management plans),
- **the approach to intervention and funding** (conditionality of grants from water agencies and the provision of funding for remedial solutions, better planning of preventive measures, and the transition of agricultural systems in catchment areas),
- **the territorial organisation of drinking water services** (supporting the necessary consolidation or pooling of water services to achieve critical mass compatible with the required investments).

[16] These recommendations aim to improve the efficiency of the drinking water management system **without the need to amend the current legislative framework (excluding the Finance Act)**. They have been put into context through an international benchmarking exercise and the analysis of case studies.

[17] To inform the development of a future interministerial action plan for funding the treatment of drinking water, **the task force developed four cost scenarios and compared them with potential funding sources**.

[18] With regard to the cost scenarios, the two main sensitivity factors determining their scale are the **scope of the measures** – depending on whether they apply solely to drinking water or are extended to include the decontamination of soil and the environment – and **the regulatory requirements** governing the quality limits for the most persistent compounds.

[19] Given the decisive role of standards in remediation strategies and costs, **the task force adopted the assumption that the standards applicable to PFAS will be tightened in the future**. A new regulatory requirement concerning TFA would constitute a major tipping point, likely to significantly alter investment needs for local authorities.

[20] **The scenarios, depending on the levels of ambition and the parameters selected, thus indicate potential additional costs compared with the current situation ranging from €1.3 to €5.7 billion (2026) per year to fund remediation**. To this must be added the funding required to make up for the backlog in investment, estimated at €4 billion (2026) per year for drinking water and sanitation infrastructure, as well as a requirement of between €850 million and €1.6 billion for the implementation of the DERU2 Directive on the reduction of urban pollution at source (including the use of PFAS products by private individuals). **The combined total of these additional costs amounts to between €6.15 billion and €11.3 billion per year**.

[21] To meet the funding requirements identified in these cost scenarios, the task force proposes, as a priority, potential additional revenue from **charges based on the ‘polluter pays’ principle** (including, in particular, the PFAS levy, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and the diffuse pollution levy) **amounting to €1.2 billion in 2026 per year**. It proposes a increase in the GEMAPI tax to €650 million (2026 prices) per year in order to bolster funding for the protection of the wider water cycle and to free up financial resources for drinking water within the water agencies’ funding programme.

[22] However, this potential revenue will be **insufficient to avoid the need, in the long term, for an increase in the average price of water**, estimated by the task force – depending on the scenarios and level of ambition adopted in the pollution reduction strategy – at between 3.5 per cent and 59 per cent, with significant variation across different regions.

[23] According to the Kantar–CIEau study³, by 2025, two-thirds of French people are prepared to pay more for tap water if this increase leads to improved water quality and reduced pollution. **Only the first two cost scenarios would result in an increase in the average price of water of less 35 per cent** – the threshold estimated by the General Secretariat for Ecological Planning as the maximum acceptable to the general public. **The other two scenarios would require a higher increase in the price of water, which would carry a greater risk in terms of acceptability. The rise in the price of water must be accompanied by mechanisms for regional solidarity, social or seasonal pricing, and support for the most vulnerable households.**

[24] An increase in local authorities' debt is unavoidable in order to finance the investments and spread this development over a long period. **Preserving the water resource is therefore an ecological and public health imperative that also carries economic implications:** it determines the ability to contain, over the long term, the increase in treatment requirements and thus the rise in the cost of water for users.

³ [Annual Opinion Survey | Water Information Centre](#)