



# **Recommendation on the Norovirus crises, the final stages of the negotiations of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and the Water Resilience Initiative**

AAC 2024-7

August 2024



The Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC) kindly thanks the EU for its financial support





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## 1. Background

With the Farm to Fork Strategy<sup>1</sup> and the Strategic Guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive aquaculture in the European Union for the period 2021-2030<sup>2</sup>, the European Union and its Member States have adopted ambitious objectives for the development of aquaculture and in particular non-fed and low trophic level species with a smaller environmental footprint, including bivalve molluscs, and for an increased organic production.

The production of shellfish, their health and their sanitary quality closely depend on the quality of coastal and transitional waters. The ambitious goals set by the EU and its Member States to develop aquaculture must be matched with adequate support to the existing sector by providing the right environmental condition and protecting shellfish farming water.

The release into the environment of not (sufficiently) treated wastewater is an obstacle to the development of shellfish farming and its contribution to the objectives of the transition towards a more sustainable food supply.

In October 2022, the European Commission proposed a complete overhaul of the EU's Directive on the treatment of urban wastewater<sup>3</sup>, as part of a package of legislations in the framework of the Zero Pollution Action Plan. In January 2024, the co-legislators, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament, reached an agreement on the new Directive<sup>4</sup>.

The Aquaculture Advisory Council (AAC) welcomes the political agreement found by the co-legislators on the recast of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive and calls for a swift finalization of its adoption. However, the AAC would like to draw attention to several important points of importance to the quality of shellfish waters.

## 2. Justification

**The quality of water is essential for shellfish farming and decisive for shellfish health and shellfish sanitary quality.** The recent norovirus crisis in France<sup>5</sup>, during the end of the year holidays season when oyster producers normally make 70% of their annual turnover, is a dramatic reminder of the direct links between climate change, water pollution and human health. The negative impact in terms of image for oyster producers, and more generally for the shellfish sector, is lasting longer and having a wider geographical impact than the administrative closures which concerned 25 oyster producing areas in France. Consumer confidence has still not been restored and sales are still being badly affected. Irish producers also regularly face similar situations with norovirus contaminations of their oysters due to overflow of insufficiently treated wastewaters.

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the European Commission, COM(2020) 381 final, [A Farm to Fork Strategy: for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system](#)

<sup>2</sup> Communication from the European Commission, COM (2021) 236 final, [Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030](#)

<sup>3</sup> Press release, European Commission, 26 October 2022 - [European Green Deal: Commission proposes rules for cleaner air and water](#)

<sup>4</sup> Press release, European Commission, 29 January 2024 - [Commission welcomes provisional agreement for more thorough and more cost-effective urban wastewater management](#)

<sup>5</sup> ["S'attaquer aux contaminations ostréicoles"](#), Parliamentary question and Government's reply, National Assembly, France, 13 March 2024



While the shellfish sector is abiding by the strictest sanitary standards and deploying significant efforts to prevent consumer contaminations by investing in improved monitoring and purification solutions, tackling the problem at the source is indispensable and consistent with polluters pays principle.

The contamination of shellfish by norovirus is only one example of the impact of water pollution on shellfish. Chemical contaminants such as dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls, heavy metals (particularly lead, mercury, cadmium and arsenic) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons from the surrounding waters are also problematic for shellfish health and their sanitary quality. There is also increasing evidence of the impact of micropollutants on shellfish health and growth<sup>6</sup>.

**A suitable treatment of urban wastewater and preventing discharges of untreated or insufficiently treated wastewater into the environment has the potential to tackle these issues and greatly improve the quality of water in shellfish production areas.**

### **3. Recommendations**

**To the European Commission:**

- Provide adequate guidance to Member States for the transposition and implementation of this Directive in relation to shellfish production areas, with specific attention to provisions concerning:
  - The surveillance of urban wastewater, encouraging shellfish producing countries to include noroviruses in the list of parameters to be monitored in wastewater, providing the necessary guidance on the related protocols for analysis in water, to assess the effectiveness of wastewater treatments on the reduction of norovirus loads;
  - Risk assessment and management, making sure that due consideration is given to shellfish production areas and that adequate wastewater treatment measures are taken to protect and make fully suitable water quality in these areas;
- Closely monitor and - if relevant - provide additional guidance to Member States for the protection of shellfish waters under the Water Framework Directive provisions, for the design of specific monitoring programmes, the definition of additional objectives and specific measures to restore and protect shellfish water quality, including in relation to urban wastewater treatment and discharges.
- Support the identification and exchange of best practices, such as real-time communication to the sectors concerned by discharges of untreated / partially treated wastewater into the

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<sup>6</sup> [Microplastics and seafood: lower trophic organisms at highest risk of contamination](#), 2020, Chris Walkinshaw et al.

[Impact of polyester and cotton microfibers on growth and sublethal biomarkers in juvenile mussels](#), 2023, Chris Walkinshaw et al.

[On the horns of a dilemma: Evaluation of synthetic and natural textile microfibre effects on the physiology of the pacific oyster \*Crassostrea gigas\*](#), 2023, Camille Détrée et al.



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environment.

- Consider the previous AAC recommendations on norovirus contaminations (November 2019<sup>7</sup>, June 2020<sup>8</sup> and January 2022<sup>9</sup>).

**To the Member States:**

- Ensure a swift finalization of the adoption of the agreement found with the European Parliament and then a timely transposition of the new Directive;
- Fully and adequately consider shellfish production areas in the implementation of the new Directive :
  - By including noroviruses in the list of parameters to be monitored in wastewater in order to assess the effectiveness of wastewater treatments on the reduction of norovirus loads;
  - By including pollution reduction objectives in urban wastewater management plans based on the results of listed and monitored parameters
  - By applying appropriate wastewater treatment measures to protect water quality in these areas and make it fully suitable for the objectives set. For example, by tackling storm water overflows by setting a target for the separation of collect systems for rain waters and domestic wastewaters, beyond what is already foreseen under the Integrated Urban Wastewater Management Plans.

Finally, the AAC would like to underline the importance of the Water Resilience Initiative initially announced in the Commission's 2024 Work Programme and then put on hold. We ask the Commission to take this initiative further as soon as possible and to fully include transition and coastal waters in the scope of the initiative.

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<sup>7</sup> [AAC Recommendation on Analysis of the European survey of norovirus in oysters](#) (November 2019)

<sup>8</sup> [AAC Recommendation on the proposal for a delegated act to amend Annex III to Regulation 853/2004](#) (June 2020)

<sup>9</sup> [AAC Recommendation on Anticipating Noroviral Contamination through the Use of Antidiarrhoeals](#) (January 2022)



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