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GROUNDWATER PROTECTION: PARLIAMENT REFUTES ATTACK FROM INDUSTRIAL AGRICULTURE

(28 April 2005, Brussels) European Parliament today voted on future groundwater protection rules and rejected attempts to exempt widespread agriculture pollution of nitrates and pesticides, said the European Environmental Bureau (EEB).

In an effort to update Europe's 25 year old groundwater protection regime Parliament proposes around 90 changes to the Commission's proposal for a new Groundwater Directive. Parliament stresses the need to maintain existing requirements to prevent pollution, to strictly avoid any further chemical deterioration of current groundwater condition and set quality standards on the basis of (eco-) toxicological, not economic, criteria. Most importantly Parliament rejected not having strict controls over agriculture pollution, which some MEPs had asked for.

Regrettably Parliament failed by a few votes to adopt the measures necessary for the identification and prevention of input of dangerous chemicals, that pose a long-term or irreversible threat to groundwater, the environment or human health. Many other amendments passed by Parliament are rather confusing and/or in open contradiction with the letter and spirit of Europe's framework law on water protection dating from 2000. Therefore the Council will find it difficult to use the details of the Parliament's vote in its deliberations.

"We are glad that Parliament resisted the pressure from agricultural industry and maintains equal treatment of all groundwater polluters" said Stefan Scheuer, EU Policy Director of the EEB. "This should be a clear signal for Council to apply a common approach to point and diffuse pollution. Ministers have still a big job to do in order to repair the flawed Commission proposal and make it workable to safeguard Europe's most important water resource from contamination by hazardous chemicals."

According to the European Environment Agency 87% of groundwater under farmland fails to meet EU drinking water guide values for nitrates and 10 out of 11 countries report a risk of pesticide pollution. Further the Agency estimates that the cost of nitrate reduction is 5 to 10 times cheaper than removing nitrate from polluted water in order to achieve drinking water standards.

For more information

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