



24 August 2022

To:
HELCOM Contracting Parties being EU member states and the European Union
Associated HELCOM Heads of Delegations
HELCOM Secretariat

Subject: Call to relevant Ministers around the Baltic Sea and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission – HELCOM) to ensure urgent action is taken to restore the Oder River.

Dear Madam/Sir,

WWF offices and partner organizations around the Baltic are concerned about the ecological catastrophe of historical proportions that is caused by the pollution incident in the Oder River. It is potentially the largest freshwater catastrophe in Europe, which has caused death of hundreds of tonnes of fish and negatively impacting other aquatic life, in what is the third biggest river by catchment area in the Baltic region.

We are concerned by the slow and insufficient response by the Polish government and its agencies responsible for supervision of water quality and water management. Water quality has not been tested systematically, initial samples went missing and the warning and alarm procedures of the International Commission for the Protection of the Odra River against Pollution were initiated more than ten days too late. In addition, proactive communication with appropriate counterpart agencies in Baltic states has been limited, despite Oder River draining into the Baltic Sea, which is already significantly contaminated by hazardous substances. Without proper action, the pollution and its effects in the Oder risk impacting Baltic ecosystems.

While the responsibility to take urgent action lies with Poland and Germany, the potential effect on the Baltic Sea is one of common concern. Thus, we urge you to join forces and support the endeavour to clean up and restore the ecosystem of the Oder River. This level of emergency calls for coordinated action on par with large oil spills or natural disasters.

At the Baltic level we urge you to organize an extraordinary meeting of the Helsinki Commission, or equivalent, to:

- Decide on joint action to respond to the urgent situation unfolding in the Oder, including continuous and adequate monitoring in the longer term, and to restore the river ecosystem and species
- Initiate a process to set protocols on how to deal with similar situations in the future, and ensure suitable information exchange, compliance mechanism, expertise and resources are available at a regional level, in accordance with suitable Articles of the Convention (specifically 13, 16, 25)
- Ensure proper surveillance of harmful industries and alarm systems in all basin countries to allow earliest possible counter measures if people and the environment are under threat.

If such a meeting should prove difficult to convene, WWF as Observers to HELCOM call for the above-mentioned points to be addressed at the next meeting of Heads of Delegation.

The Polish and German governments should:

- Prepare and pass a Government Programme for the Restoration of the Oder River Ecosystem and provide an emergency budget for starting the restoration activities.
- Fully review plans for further exploitation of the Oder River for inland navigation, water flow regulation and channelisation which threatens to cause further breakdown of the Oder ecosystem and contradicting the EU-Water Framework Directive. Attempts to integrate the Oder in the TEN-T network of international waterways should stop.
- Reallocate finances planned for waterways and dam construction to nature-based river restoration and nature-based solutions for flood risk reduction to increase the ecological resilience of the Oder River.

Any support to Poland and Germany needs to come with the above-mentioned conditions.

The pollution incident in Oder River has shown how fragile our ecosystems are. We hope that we all learn from this experience and accelerate efforts to improve river health in Europe in general by preventing and reducing water pollution, barriers and flow alterations. These efforts are essential to reach the objectives in the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan, the Water Framework Directive and other environmental legislation in the EU. Restoring the Oder and other degraded freshwater ecosystems is a necessity to sustain the natural functions of rivers, lakes and wetlands. Only with healthy, biodiverse water bodies can we allow nature to thrive, ensure clean and sufficient water supply, and resilience to climate change impacts.

Yours sincerely,

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Mirosław Proppé, CEO, WWF Polska Foundation

Liisa Rohweder, CEO, WWF Finland

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