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# WWF Poland Foundation's position on the Polish government's plan to restore the Oder river

Due to the ongoing tragic situation in the Oder river, there is an urgent need to develop a plan and begin the restoration of the Oder. The rescue plan for the Oder is being prepared by the Polish government under the responsibility of the Ministry of Infrastructure, but not the Ministry of Climate and Environment. And this is not the only surprise. The Ministry of Infrastructure intends to carry out the rescue plan by introducing a special act addressing the Oder. Unfortunately, the premise of this act is in conflict with the current scientific knowledge and the Water Framework Directive, which can only result in the further deterioration of the ecological status of the Oder and will put the river at risk of more similar disasters in the future.

## The premise of the special act

**The Ministry of Infrastructure has prepared an investment plan** which entails simplifying investment procedures in terms of environmental impact assessments and construction permits for projects ensuring:

- 1) proper quality of treated sewage, i.e.:
  - **expansion and modernization of sewage treatment plants** in the Oder river basin,
  - **construction of new sewage systems,**
- 2) increased availability of water resources in the Oder (raising water level in the river), i.e.:
  - **construction of artificial reservoirs,**
    - o a group of specialists and plans for the Oder river expansion will identify which barrages will be built in order to most effectively raise water levels, including through retention in the Oder channel,
  - **transformation of existing detention basins into retention basins,**
    - o this applies to the largest reservoir in **Racibórz** – the transformation project is currently in the preparatory phase,
    - o the government plans to enter into **negotiations with the EU institutions and the World Bank in order to begin the transformation** of those detention basins which are contractually prohibited from being transformed (1).

*“All of this boils down to one thing: facilitating more harmful river control measures under the guise of ‘restoring’ the Oder. Despite many concerns voiced by the scientists and NGOs, the government is yet again locking itself in uneconomic, ineffective flood and drought prevention plans, which will bring more similar disasters to the Oder. The regulation of the Oder was one of the key factors contributing to the disaster which struck this river”,* says Katarzyna Czupryniak, water protection specialist at WWF Poland Foundation.

## Who will work on the special act?

Works on the special act are to be conducted in three stages. Firstly, an **interdepartmental team** was created, which, according to the government's claims, is tasked with drafting the



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act with the support of **experts and NGOs**. The representatives of WWF Poland have officially requested that the Foundation be included in the works on the act. The next stage will consist in public consultations, in which the Foundation also intends to participate. The final stage are the parliamentary proceedings, which are set to take place in Q4 of 2022, provided that the act is ready in two months' time.

### **Where to find the money?**

Currently, **18.6 billion** PLN from the funds allocated to sewage management policies can be used to finance the implementation of the special act.

Additionally, the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has declared further financial support from the resources of the **National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management, regional funds for environmental protection and water management** and the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as the funds prepared and diverted for this purpose by the Minister for Development Funds and Regional Policy, as well as from investment expenditure of the State Water Holding Polish Waters.

The government also plans on providing **financial compensation** to those business owners who have been most affected by the situation in the Oder river. A separate act drafted by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology is set to be discussed during the next session of the Parliament, so that compensation could already be paid in September.

### **The government and Polish Waters will work together to restore the Oder**

Apart from the government's work on the special act, the State Water Holding Polish Waters plans to develop an ecosystem restoration program for the Oder, including fish stocking. According to the statements, the work is to be done with the participation of the Polish Angling Association, as well as environmental organizations and local governments. WWF Poland Foundation has made a formal request to the State Water Holding Polish Waters to be included in the preparation of the Oder restoration program (2).

### **The government is playing the blame game**

The rescue plan for the Oder is being prepared by the Ministry of Infrastructure – not the ministry which is responsible for environmental protection. As a result, its technical solutions stand in contrast with the current scientific knowledge about the protection of river ecosystems. The special act, which was intended to ensure the restoration of the river's ecosystem, becomes another threat. It alleviates investment burdens related to environmental impact assessments and construction permits for artificial reservoirs and dams.

**Marek Gróbarczyk, a government representative for water management and investment in marine and water management and a secretary of state in the Ministry of Infrastructure, stated that the Oder disaster was caused by insufficient capital investments in this river (3).** WWF Poland believes that these words demonstrate a lack of understanding of the ecological role of rivers and the mechanics of river ecosystems, therefore also of the root causes of the disaster.

The present ecological disaster was mainly caused by the regulation of the Oder. **According to the minister, lack of capital investment will lead to the extinction of fish in the Oder.** What's the environmentalists' reply to that? *"If we don't stop regulating the river, we can expect the history to repeat itself next year. Further investments into the construction of reservoirs, plans to expand navigation on the Oder, maintenance works and lack of control over the*



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*pollutants discharged into the river will cause the fish extinction in the Oder to continue”, says Dr Alicja Pawelec of WWF Poland.*

**Minister Marek Gróbarczyk: *What will happen next year if the situation in the Oder doesn't change? We will be dealing with the same problem. Lack of capital investment will lead to the extinction of fish in the Oder.***

This statement stands in complete opposition to the current scientific knowledge. Regulating and damming the rivers is one of the most important factors responsible for the extinction of fish worldwide (4). Investment in the construction of the Włocławek Dam on the Vistula river resulted in the extinction of the Vistula populations of the Atlantic sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus*) and Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*), as well as a drastic decrease in the numbers of bream (*Abramis brama*).

It is true that if the situation in the Oder stays the same, next year could see another disaster like this. However, the necessary changes need to go in a completely different direction – the restoration of the Oder should be accomplished by removing flow control and damming structures and by bringing back meanders and floodplains where it's possible and safe. The regulation of the Oder was one of the key factors that led to the golden algae bloom.

#### **Where do the golden algae come from?**

**According to the Polish government, the Oder disaster has natural causes and was triggered by low water levels and high temperatures.** This is not the entire truth – the Oder disaster and the algal bloom are the results of human activity. The bloom of the *Prymnesium parvum* algae (so-called golden algae) was caused predominantly by saline water, which does not occur naturally in the Oder. Naturally saline waters are typical of seas and oceans, whereas rivers are freshwater ecosystems. The golden algae could have been brought to the Oder by ships or animals, e.g. birds, but their bloom would not be possible without increased water salinity.

Humans are the ones responsible for introducing salt water into the fresh waters of the Oder, presumably by discharging saline mine wastewater. Low level and high temperature of the water can cause golden algae to bloom only in conjunction with increased water salinity. Furthermore, low water level, high temperature and the accumulation of various substances (saline water in this case) in stagnant water is a perfect description of the conditions in reservoirs, which are projected to be built under the special act. This means that by building new reservoirs we are bringing more similar disasters on ourselves.

#### **Why did it happen in the Oder and not in the Vistula?**

**Minister Marek Gróbarczyk pointed out that nothing of the kind has happened yet in the Vistula, which in its upper course is considerably rich in dams and has appropriate water resources.**

Unlike the Oder, the Vistula is the last large European river which retains a fairly natural character in its middle and lower courses. Its ability to self-purify has not been compromised by human interventions into its morphology, i.e. regulation and hydrotechnical structures, in quite the same manner as the Oder's has. Self-purification capabilities of the Vistula are enough to counteract increased water salinity, in contrast to the abilities of the Oder which have been reduced by regulation.

What is more, the Włocławek Reservoir, which is the only dam reservoir in the lower Vistula, regularly experiences negative effects of the inflow and stagnation of contaminants coming from the upper reaches. The Polish Waters' web page contains information about the



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accumulation of ca. 47 million cubic meters of sediments in the reservoir (5). Therefore, it cannot be said that “nothing of the kind has happened in the Vistula”, but it can be said that owing to the largely natural character of the middle and lower Vistula human activity has not yet led to a disaster like the one in the Oder.

### **How can we help the Oder?**

We must immediately increase available water resources in the Oder river valley by improving water retention in the entire basin (landscape retention capacity). This can be done by restoring wetlands, planting trees, creating natural retention zones by e.g. moving levees away from the river to reclaim floodplains. The river should be free to spread its waters on the floodplains in the spring and fall, which ensures the proper functioning of ecosystems of the river valley and the river itself, as well as natural self-purification ability of the water. Building barrages permanently blocking the river is the opposite to this process.

### **Red light for retention basins**

Through the words of minister Marek Gróbarczyk, the ministry reveals its intentions to rebuild flood control basins, which were constructed under the previous administration to serve as detention basins. First of all, the government is planning to convert the Racibórz reservoir into a retention basin, thus creating a large water reserve for the Oder.

This is contrary to the recommendations of scientists and naturalists who point out that reservoirs block the course of the river or the artificial side channel and permanently alter the streamflow in the river, causing irreversible environmental damage, such as the extinction of migratory fish species, among other things. Because of the warm, stagnant water, these reservoirs are also an ideal place for algal blooms of e.g. the toxic *P.parvum* or cyanobacteria which are toxic to humans. Detention basins don't dam the river permanently and don't contain stagnant water. They are reserved and prepared to reduce the flood tide and only store water during the periods of high water. Another solution are polders, which are environmentally beneficial, can be used e.g. for agricultural purposes and are significantly cheaper to maintain.

It should be emphasized that according to the Drought effects prevention plan developed by the State Water Holding Polish Waters drought occurs even in areas with functioning retention basins. Therefore water reservoirs are not a good solution to the drought problem. The long-term solutions in this regard are the restoration of natural catchment retention and the rewilding of rivers, which can truly boost the restoration of water resources in rivers.

### **Inland navigation is the final nail in the coffin**

The government dreams of inland navigation... In the words of **minister Marek Gróbarczyk**: *It is obvious to us that ports in Szczecin and Świnoujście, the entire West Pomeranian region and Western Poland on the whole start to play a very important role when it comes to transportation – the route 65, the modernization and completion of the S3 road and the construction of a container terminal with a waterway is an opportunity for the development, we are modernizing the “Nadodrzancka” rail route and making the Oder navigable.*

In view of ongoing climate change and decreased availability of water resources, the expansion of navigation on the Oder is unprofitable and cannot be justified in economic terms. As pointed out by Professor Elżbieta Nachlik, the President of the National Water Management Board in 2011-2015, there is no water in the Oder, so it will not be navigable (4). A good and rational solution is to [further develop rail infrastructure](#) (5).



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The government representative claimed that the European Commission forces Poland to expand its waterways. The Directive, on which this claim is based, requires Member States to shift traffic from roads towards other modes of transportation, such as trains. According to [WWF Poland Foundation's report „Żegluga czy kolej?. Perspektywy rozwoju zrównoważonego transportu w Polsce do 2050 roku”](#), investing in new waterways is uneconomical due to e.g. more and more often periods of low water levels preventing or hindering barge traffic and to very long delivery times. Moreover, modernization of existing railways is much cheaper than building brand new inland navigation infrastructure. Therefore, it is only right to expand the rail network and improve connections between the ports in Szczecin and Świnoujście and the rest of the country.

### Healthy nature is your constitutional right

Under the Polish Constitution, public authorities are obligated to protect the natural environment, prevent negative health impacts of environmental degradation and introduce policies that ensure ecological safety for current and future generations. The state's duty is to protect nature based on the sustainable development principle. Extensive capital investment plans, transforming natural rivers into technical channels for commercial transportation and energy purposes, destroy the environment and contradict the principle of sustainable development.

- 1) The secretary of state in the Ministry of Infrastructure, government representative for water management and investment in marine and water management, Mr Marek Gróbarczyk presented the premise of the special act during a press conference held on August 23, 2022: <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1405214%2Cwiceminister-infrastruktury-specustawa-dot-odry-ulatwi-procesy> [accessed on September 5, 2022] and during the meeting of the Marine Economy and Inland Navigation Committee and the Environment Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry Committee on August 24, 2022. [https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/transmisje\\_arch.xsp?unid=A32692C219863007C12588A30040B3A7](https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/transmisje_arch.xsp?unid=A32692C219863007C12588A30040B3A7) [accessed on September 5, 2022].
- 2) Statements by the government representative for water management and investment in marine and water management and the President of the State Water Holding Polish Waters, Mr Krzysztof Woś, during the joint meeting of the Marine Economy and Inland Navigation Committee and the Environment Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry Committee on August 24, 2022: [https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/transmisje\\_arch.xsp?unid=A32692C219863007C12588A30040B3A7](https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/transmisje_arch.xsp?unid=A32692C219863007C12588A30040B3A7) [accessed on September 5, 2022].
- 3) A post from Mr Marek Gróbarczyk's official Facebook page dated August 29, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/marek.grobarczyk/posts/pfbid028nhYKxw3kDVqoS4Zh9W2WRXqV8Xn2ncTXnY9SGB5qGxenHYwZMdaNS1TrWNR2ikxl> [accessed on September 5, 2022].
- 4) A statement by Professor Elżbieta Nachlik during the discussion panel: "Porozmawiajmy o...": Czy należy połączyć Odrę z Dunajem?, "WATER – CITY – QUALITY OF LIFE 2021" Congress, Wrocław, 26 October 2021; see also: *Freshwater biodiversity: importance, threats, status and conservation challenges*, David Dudgeon (ed.), Biol Rev Camb Philos Soc, 2006 May;81(2):163-82: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/biological-reviews/article/abs/freshwater-biodiversity-importance-threats-status-and-conservation-challenges/96AA265E3D88C95FB802E7A73CCB4332>
- 5) WWF Poland Foundation has repeatedly appealed – unsuccessfully – to the Ministry of Infrastructure to release the results of the feasibility analysis of the expansion of inland navigation conducted in 2018 and 2019, as well as the results of the feasibility analysis of the construction of the Siarzewo barrage on the Vistula river. [Raport Fundacji WWF Polska „Żegluga czy kolej?. Perspektywy rozwoju zrównoważonego transportu w Polsce do 2050 roku”](#) is the only currently available analysis containing data on the unprofitability of the expansion of inland navigation



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