

UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes

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More than 150 major rivers and 50 large lakes in the UNECE region run along or straddle the border between two or more countries. Twenty European countries depend for more than 10% of their water resources on neighbouring countries and five countries draw 75% of their resources from upstream countries.

UNECE member States are aware of the need for cooperation if they are to ensure that transboundary waters are used reasonably and equitably. They know that they share the same water resources and rely on each other to apply effective solutions. The UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes¹ (1992, Water Convention), ratified by 36 UNECE countries and the European Community reflect this awareness. It is in force since 1996.

The Convention takes a holistic approach based on the understanding that water resources play an integral part in ecosystems as well as in human societies and economies. Its commitment to integrated water resources management replaces an earlier focus on localized sources of pollution and management of separate components of the ecosystem. It strengthens national measures and transboundary cooperation for the protection and ecologically sound management of transboundary surface waters and groundwater.

The three-pillar normative cornerstone of the Convention is based on (a) the no significant harm rule; (b) the equitable and reasonable utilization principle; and (c) the cooperation principle, as the catalyst for the realization of the prior two. The Convention obliges Riparian Parties to conclude specific bilateral or multilateral agreements providing for the establishment of joint bodies, and to enter into consultations upon request. The Water Convention has served as a model for transboundary cooperation agreements throughout the UNECE region, and has an important role to play in Central Asia by providing a framework for interstate institutional and legal cooperation.

In 2003, the Water Convention was amended to allow accession by countries outside the UNECE region, thus inviting the rest of the world to use the Convention's legal framework and to benefit from its experience. Once the amendment enters into force, this will be of particular importance for countries that border the UNECE region, such as Afghanistan, China and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The 1999 Protocol on Water and Health², in force since 2005, aims to protect human health by better water management. Parties are required to establish national and local targets for the quality of drinking water and the quality of discharges, as well as for the performance of water supply and waste-water treatment.

¹ <http://www.unece.org/env/water/welcome.html>

² http://www.unece.org/env/water/text/text_protocol.htm