WECF | Women in Europe for a Common Future

New European Member States Romania and Bulgaria address the looming impossibility of achieving their obligations under the EC Urban Waste Water Directive and Water Framework Directive

Round Table in Sofia looks at solutions

Sofia, Bulgaria, 19 March 2010 **- "*How high will the sanctions be* which the Bulgarian tax payers will have to pay for not fulfilling their requirements under the Urban Waste Water directive?" was one of the first questions posed to Mrs Bogdanova of the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment. Bulgaria has committed to assuring waste water treatment for all towns with 2000 to 10.000 inhabitants by 2014, but currently, low-cost wastewater systems have been built in Bulgaria.**

Mr. Krasimir Zhivkov, Governor of the Sofia Oblast, welcomed the more than 90 representatives of the Bulgarian and Romanian ministries of Environment, Public Works, Agriculture and Health, water operators, basin authorities, mayors, governors, NGOs, scientists, the World Bank, the European Commission and international experts from France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and Slovakia who met for the "**round table dialogue with the European Commission : how to reach sustainable and cost effective sanitation and waste treatment in Bulgarian and Romanian rural areas**"

In Romania, it remains a great challenge to provide the more than 3000 communes which still need waste water systems before 2018. "***Therefore we are so interested by this round table, as we need low-cost solutions to be able to achieve the targets of the urban waste water directive***, and the water framework directive", said Mrs. Ileana Vasilescu, from the Romanian ministry of Environment.

Professor Duncan Mara of the University of Leeds presented small-bore sewers and low cost waste-water stabilization ponds – of which over 5500 ponds are in use in Germany and France – to provide waste water treatment to small communities in Bulgaria and Romania. ***These waste water systems cost around 50% less then conventional systems***. "If you really want to waste money, you can use standard size sewage pipes and conventional technical systems" said Mara.

The European Commission representative, Helmut Bloech, commented: "the Urban Waste Water Directive does not prescribe technologies, but sets targets for environmental protection. Achieving these targets most efficiently, including with simplified sewers and lagoons for waste water treatment, makes only good sense". Mr. Bloech commented on the fact that the Urban Waste Water Directive does not specify criteria for communities with less then 2000 inhabitants, nevertheless: "***It is unethical to forget about the rural populations where people drink from their shallow wells their own waste water or that from their neighbours***".

Mr. Bloech warmly welcomed the low-cost solutions of modern dry sanitation options which the NGO network WECF implements in pilot projects for schools and households in Bulgaria and Romania as a reliable interim solution until water supply and waste water treatment are installed.

Engineer Andrea Albold, explained that – as no Bulgarian engineers could be found – she had been commissioned by WECF to design the first-ever constructed wetland waste-water system for a children's home in Vidrare, in Pravetz municipality. "***the technical design is ready, the money from the donor has been received, but, we cannot build, as we cannot get the permit***.

WECF presented a "**technical guide on decentralized cost-effective natural waste water systems**" at the conference, as a tool for local decision makers and water operators and engineers. The publication is available in Bulgarian, Romanian and English at: www.wecf.eu . "We need to demonstrate these low cost systems", said Galia Badarskay of GWP Bulgaria, "too many too expensive waste water treatment plants are being build. ***Bulgaria is a poor country, people can not afford to pay the same fees for waste water as in other European countries***.

The consulting company SHER from Belgium, presented a survey carried out for the Bulgarian ministry of Agriculture. The survey covered 32 villages from all different regions and different climate and geographical areas. ***In 50% of the villages, the tap water contained un-allowed bacteria***. In one village, a drinking water well had been transformed into a pit-latrine, thus directly contaminating the ground water table with bacteria and nitrates.

SHER identified the most appropriate and cost-effective wastewater solutions for 5 villages: reed-bed filters, bio-disks, wastewater lagoons and combined septic tanks for clusters of houses. "***Conventional waste water systems are not affordable for rural communities***. It are these type of alternative low-cost technologies, adjusted to the local conditions, which are necessary", concluded Olivier Demeure of SHER.

"The problem is that engineers earn most money with expensive projects", commented prof. Mara. "***Engineers are paid based on a percentage of the investment volume. This is anti-low-cost technologies***". Ministries should impose a change of fee structure, engineers should be paid be flat rates. "And if the consultant has not considered low cost technology in the technology option comparison, he should not be paid", says Mara.

"We need to educate the public", said Emilia Kraeva of the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment, "currently rural communities want to have the same expensive systems as towns".

Notes to Editors

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The powerpoint presentations and updated participants list will be available as a download on the WECF website, at http://www.wecf.eu/english/articles/2010/03/roundtablesofia-report.php

For a description of the design of the constructed-wetland wastewater treatment system by Otterwasser and WECF for the children's home in Pravetz, Bulgaria, see http://www.wecf.eu/english/articles/2009/05/Constructed-Wetlands.php

About WECF

A healthy Environment for All is the main mission of WECF, Women in Europe for a Common Future. WECF is a network of a hundred women's and environmental organisations in 40 countries. Our network spans Western Europe and the EECCA region (Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia). WECF has three offices: in the Netherlands, Germany and France. WECF mobilises women to find affordable solutions to the environmental health problems in their communities and encourages women in decision making : www.wecf.eu