[Host]

When temperatures climb above 30 degrees, that first step into a lake feels like pure relief. The cool water revitalises body and mind.

The air shimmers. Sunlight sparkles on the surface of the water. The tranquility is punctuated only by the excited squeals of children and the occasional splash as someone dives in.

Instead of heading to an outdoor swimming pool, you can often enjoy a swim in nature without second thought.

Official bathing sites generally display a sign somewhere near the water providing information on the water quality. If you are lucky, you will see three stars – the top rating. It can't get much better than that, right?

But on closer inspection, there might be something else to be seen on the sign. Alongside general information for visitors, details of the water quality may be provided. And here in the fine print, you might see something that spoils the relaxing summer vibes: PFAS.

These so-called "forever chemicals" do not break down naturally. Instead, they build up over time in the environment – and in our bodies. Some have been demonstrated to increase the risk of cancer.

How does that fit together: Excellent bathing water quality – but simultaneously, there is an indication of problematic chemical substances?

How clean are our bathing waters really?

That is exactly what we are going to explore in this episode.

[Intro-Jingle + Slogan]

LensEU – zooming in on what drives Europe's community

[Host]

I amm your host, Lilith Grull, an international reporter at CORRECTIV and part of CORRECTIV.Europe.

Together with local and freelance journalists from throughout Europe, we investigate issues that cross national borders – and affect us all.

For our latest data investigation, we took a deep dive into the quality of bathing waters across Europe.

What we found was concerning.

Thousands of bathing sites across the European Union have been designated as excellent. Yet many of these waters are also contaminated with chemical substances.

This raises a slew of questions.

What are the implications for people? And for nature, when chemical substances are present in the water?

Who monitors these waters? Where does the pollution come from?

And what happens when the water quality falls below the standard it should meet?

To answer these questions, we spoke to experts and local journalists from across Europe. We also took a closer look into one particular bathing site as part of our investigation.

[Jingle]

[Host]

It is nothing new, but it bears repeating: Europe is once again experiencing a very hot summer.

Researchers at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research have published a study:

showing that heatwaves are becoming much more frequent here than in other parts of the Northern Hemisphere.

In fact, heatwaves in Europe now occur around three to four times more often than in other mid-latitude regions – such as the United States and Canada.

That makes a refreshing swim in a lake more important than ever. But only if the water is safe.

Well, luckily, Europe has an official ranking of bathing water quality, which is intended to help people check whether it is safe to enter the water before swimming.

The ranking covers approximately 22,000 officially designated bathing sites across Europe.

This is the first shortcoming: The list only includes places that have been officially registered as bathing sites.

Other popular swimming spots simply are not included. Such as quarries, lakes or riverbanks that might be well known to locals but have no official status

Even so, the designated bathing sites are monitored regularly. Regional authorities are required to test the water quality. That is a legal obligation under the European Bathing Water Directive. Results are then reported to the European Environment Agency, which compiles the Europe-wide ranking.

However, these measurements reveal a second shortcoming. The European Bathing Water Directive only requires that bathing sites are tested for two microbiological indicators. Both are types of faecal bacteria.

This might sound complicated – but it is actually quite simple.

These microbiological indicators are used to check whether the water has been contaminated by microorganisms. Those bacteria themselves can be found in the environment. They also live in the intestines of people and animals. If these can be detected, this is taken as an indication that the water has come into contact with potential sources of contamination.

For example, heavy rain or the drainage system may have caused dog excrement, livestock manure, or sewage to flow into the water.

Detection of these is therefore a warning sign, suggesting other potentially harmful germs may also be present.

That is why these microbiological indicators are used to assess the hygiene of drinking water, bathing waters, and other bodies of water. They help identify potential health risks at an early stage.

But only two of these indicators legally have to be measured. They are E. coli and intestinal enterococci. So these tests mainly tell us about germs. They look for bacteria that can indicate the water has been contaminated. But they do not test for chemical substances like PFAS or heavy metals like mercury.

Or in other words, the rating focuses on whether swimming poses an immediate health risk, but tells us very little about any long-term build-up of pollutants in the water.

This means a bathing site can be officially rated as having excellent bathing water quality – while still containing chemicals that are not included in the assessment.

And there are several risks here: These substances do not just disappear. They can remain in rivers and lakes for years.

They can have long-term and serious consequences – for rivers and lakes, for animals and plants, and ultimately for us humans too. Especially if we are directly exposed to them, for example by accidentally swallowing some contaminated water while swimming. Or when we have a fresh cut.

That is why this initial quality check – and consequently the bathing water rating – was not good enough for us. And in the context of our investigation, we therefore combined the bathing water ranking with a second dataset: the European monitoring data collected under the Water Framework Directive.

[Jingle]

[Host]

So, what does this European monitoring under the Water Framework Directive actually cover?

It includes data on the chemical status of surface waters. This includes waters from the official bathing sites in the ranking we discussed earlier.

But the Water Framework Directive takes testing much further than the bathing water ranking from the Bathing Water Directive.

So. Within the Water Framework Directive, authorities are required to test these waters regularly for a wide range of chemical pollutants.

The aim is not only to assess the visible quality of the water. It is also to detect long-term pollution in the ecosystem.

We at CORRECTIV.Europe wanted to answer one simple question:

How good, really, is the quality of our bathing waters?

To answer this, we combined the official bathing water quality data for the 22,000 designated bathing sites with data from the Water Framework Directive monitoring programme.

But first, we had to solve one problem. The two datasets do not share a common unique identifier.

So we linked the bathing sites using geographical information. Our data journalist used the official coordinates for each bathing site. This allowed her to match every site with the correct river, lake, coastal water, or transitional water in the monitoring data. And this gave us a shared basis for comparison.

This enabled us, for the first time, to paint a fairly accurate picture of the water quality measurements available for official bathing sites in nature.

In other words, where, for example, chemicals harmful to health are also present.

The results of our investigation are striking.

Across the European Union, at least 7,866 bathing sites are officially rated as having clean water under the Bathing Water Directive – even though they are situated on bodies of water that have been shown to be contaminated with chemical pollutants.

Most of these particular bathing sites are in Italy, Germany, Denmark, Hungary, and France.

For us bathers, this means: We enter the water without second thought, but actually we are potentially exposing ourselves to health risks.

The pollutants include PFAS, heavy metals, and pesticide residues. All of these can be seriously detrimental to human health.

Although, the severity of the impact depends on the substance, the amount, and how long a person is exposed to it. Some pollutants are suspected, for example, of weakening the immune system or increasing the risk of cancer. Others can affect the liver or kidneys, or even interfere with children's development.

Children can be especially vulnerable since their bodies are still developing and are often more sensitive to harmful substances.

But there is an important limitation here: the mere presence of hazardous chemicals does not automatically mean swimming is unsafe. Nor does it mean the entire ecosystem is collapsing.

Because, as the saying goes, the dose makes the poison.

Detection of a pollutant does not necessarily mean bathers are in danger, just that there could be an increased risk.

The data we analysed did not show how high the concentrations were. For that reason, our investigation – and our interactive atlas of lakes and rivers – only show which pollutants were detected by authorities. But they do not show how much of each substance was present in the water. Unfortunately, only the local authorities have this data – we do not.

Links to both the interactive atlas and our investigation can be found in the show notes. By accessing the links you can also read more about our methodology and check the quality of water bodies near you.

[ZJingle]

[Host]

We found this limitation in the data to be somewhat unsatisfying. Because we wanted to know the exact details of the current situation.

But of course, we could not collect samples from all 22,000 designated bathing sites across the Europe Union and carry out a full analysis. We would have loved to. But we simply do not have the resources for that.

So we chose one bathing site. We knew there was an old dumping side nearby. And we decided to collect a water sample ourselves.

What did we find? We will come back to that later.

To begin with, we will look at how this kind of pollution occurs and what causes it.

During our investigation, we spoke to several scientists who specialise in water quality to understand the issue better.

[Soundbite Expert Markus Große Ophoff]

Original in German:

Markus Große Orhoff. Ich arbeite mit in der Expertenkommission Spurenstoffe des Bundesumweltministeriums. Äh, ich bin gleichzeitig Professor an der Hochschule Osnabrück und beschäftige mich seit über dreißig Jahren mit Chemikalien in der Umwelt

English translation:
I'm Markus Große Orhoff. I'm a member of the German Federal Ministry for the Environment's Expert Commission on Trace Substances. I'm also a professor at

Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences, and I've been working on the issue of chemicals in the environment for more than thirty years.

[Host]

Markus Große Ophof is a member of the German environmental agency's expert committee for assessing the relevance of trace substances.

We asked him when bathing water becomes a cause for concern – and why we should care.

[Soundbite Expert Markus Große Ophoff]

German in Original:

Also wenn man im Wasser schwimmt, Badewasser oder badet oder kleine Kinder am Strand spielen, dann nehmen wir natürlich immer auch kleinere Mengen an Wasser auf. Das lässt sich gar nicht verhindern. Die Keime sind die erste Gefahr. Dadurch kann ich Durchfall kriegen, ich kann 'ne Infektion kriegen . Es ist aber natürlich auch so, dass, äh, ja, Chemikalien eine Rolle spielen können. Das ist in fast allen Gewässern nicht der Fall, aber wenn ich bestimmte Vorbelastungen in der Region habe, dann kann das passieren.

English translation:

Whenever we swim or bathe in natural waters, or when young children are playing at the water's edge, we inevitably swallow small amounts of water. There's really no way to avoid it. The first risk comes from microbes.

They can cause diarrhoea or other infections. But, of course, chemicals can also play a role. In the vast majority of bathing waters, that's not an issue. But if there's existing chemical contamination in a particular area, then it can become one.

[Host]

Markus Große Ophof says, the biggest health risks when swimming are usually posed by germs.

When we swim or play in the water, we almost always swallow small amounts without noticing. This is especially the case for young children. If the water is contaminated, these germs can cause infections, stomach bugs, or other illnesses.

Markus Große Ophoff also says that chemical pollutants pose a risk in certain water bodies that are already contaminated.

As an example, these include heavy metals, pesticides, and the forever chemicals: PFAS. These substances can enter rivers and lakes from contaminated sites. Depending on their concentration, and, depending on their concentration, may be harmful to health. Some places are considered particularly at risk.

These are areas where hazardous chemicals have been produced, used, or stored.

That includes PFAS manufacturing plants, military bases, airports, fire stations, and old rubbish dumps where contaminated materials have been disposed of.

[Jingle]

[Host]

Now it is time to talk about the particular bathing site we investigated: the Filzteich

Located in the district of Schneeberg in the German state of Saxony, the Filzteich bathing lake is officially rated as having “excellent” water quality. So anyone swimming there has every reason to feel good about it.

But on closer inspection, the situation is not so straightforward. Our investigation revealed a very puzzling picture indeed.

At CORRECTIV.Europe, we became interested in the Filzteich after one of our colleagues investigated illegal waste dumping in the area. And the water body is very close to one of those sites.

Many years ago, waste from the paper industry was dumped at this contaminated site. These so-called paper sludges were deposited right next to a stream that flows into the Filzteich, next to the official bathing site.

Since becoming aware of this, the regional environmental authority has taken water samples there several times over the past few years.

The test results are not fully available to the public. We only know the details because we specifically contacted the authorities and requested the information.

Among other findings, the laboratory has repeatedly detected elevated levels of PFAS – the so-called forever chemicals.

These hardly break down at all – and can accumulate in the environment and in human bodies over long periods.

In addition, the municipal utilities company, which operates the public beach, also commissioned samples to be taken directly at the bathing area. However, they declined to provide us with the results of those tests.

To get a more well-rounded picture, we collected our own water sample at the bathing beach in June. We then had it analysed by an independent laboratory.

Among other substances, we asked the laboratory to test for the PFAS-4 group.

These four chemicals are among the most common PFAS compounds. They are also considered some of the most harmful to human health.

While the laboratory analysis showed:

That the combined level of these PFAS-4 substances was just shy of the value recommended some years ago by the German Environment Agency.

But a different picture emerges when comparing the result with the standards applicable in other countries: Denmark, for example, has stricter guideline values for

PFAS in bathing waters. Our sample exceeded the Danish guideline value almost by a factor of ten.

The Filzteich case highlights a much broader problem.

A bathing site can officially receive an excellent water quality rating, even though the water is already measurably affected by legacy pollution and industrial chemicals.

And that is precisely what shows where the politically mandated measures are failing.

[Soundbite Expert Markus Große Ophoff]

German original:

Ganz viele dieser Schadstoffe kann man eigentlich gar nicht aus Badegewässern entfernen, ähm, oder nur extrem aufwendig. Wenn man einmal so 'ne Grundbelastung hat, dann muss man das Wasser sehr aufwendig reinigen. Dann müsste man das zum Beispiel durch Aktivkohle leiten. Das ist 'ne sehr poröse Kohle und da werden viele dieser Schadstoffe aufgenommen – leider auch nicht alle – und werden dann an dieser Aktivkohle adsorbiert. Und wenn ich das Wasser dann vielfach da durchgeleitet habe, dann wird es sauberer. Das kann ich aber hauptsächlich dann machen, wenn ich 'ne akute Belastung Also wenn ich wirklich 'ne Altlast in der Nähe habe, also ich hab 'nen alten Fabrikstandort, wo Schadstoffe reingegangen sind oder bei den PFAS ist das häufig durch Löschschäume. Dann ist das über lange Zeit im Wasser und dann kann ich eigentlich für das Baden nur sagen: Hier sollte nicht gebadet werden

English translation:

Many of these pollutants can't actually be removed from bathing waters at all — or only with an enormous amount of effort. Once you have this kind of background contamination, cleaning the water becomes a very complex process. One option, for example, is to pass it through activated carbon. That's a highly porous form of carbon which absorbs many of these pollutants — although, unfortunately, not all of them — and they become adsorbed onto the activated carbon.

If you pass the water through it repeatedly, it gradually becomes cleaner. But that's really only practical when you're dealing with a specific contamination event. For example, if there's a legacy contaminated site nearby — an old factory where pollutants have entered the environment — or, in the case of PFAS, contamination often comes from firefighting foams.

Once those substances are in the water, they remain there for a very long time. And in those situations, the only advice you can really give is: people shouldn't be swimming there.

[Host]

The expert Markus Große Ophoff explains that substances like PFAS are extremely difficult to remove once in the environment.

He uses the example of activated carbon; some pollutants can be absorbed by it, as they bind to its surface. If water is filtered through activated carbon several times, it can become significantly cleaner. But not all substances are fully removed. This method is mainly suitable for acute, short-term contamination. For example, after a chemical spill in a body of water.

In cases of long-term pollution, for example, from contaminated industrial sites, or PFAS in the environment due to foam from fire extinguishers, this kind of treatment is not sufficient. In such situations, the pollutants remain in the water for a long time. The expert states that often, the only recommendation is to avoid swimming there.

Could this mean we might eventually have to give up fishing or swimming in such water bodies?

Across the European Union, there are no uniform guideline values for PFAS in bathing waters.

So it is not easy to find out whether the water in your favourite lake might actually pose a health risk. So far, only a few member states have set their own standards.

The Netherlands, for example, introduced national guideline values for PFAS in bathing waters in 2024. The reason was new scientific evidence showing that these substances can be harmful to human health even at low levels of exposure.

If you want to dive deeper into this topic, our article provides a more detailed explanation – link in the show notes.

[Jingle]

[Host]

And how is the public informed?

This is actually clearly regulated in the European Union. Every officially designated bathing site should display a clearly visible sign showing the bathing water quality – and at least also referring to possible further information. This could include details about pollutants, such as heavy metals or chemical substances.

The idea is simple: Standardised symbols and clear notices directly on site should allow swimmers to quickly understand the condition of the water. This allows them to quickly assess whether they want to swim there and what potential risks they are willing to take.

At the Filzteich, there is a notice displayed at the ticket booth by the entrance. The fine print also mentions PFAS. We spoke to a couple of swimmers, most of whom had not seen this information. During our on-site reporting, we could not find any additional visible warning.

As journalists, we always look for responsibility and potential solutions in our investigations. In the case of the Filzteich, one could say there are the visitors who might read the notice, the DNA-4 slip of paper, and inform themselves. … Well. …

Then there is the municipal utilities company, which operates the bathing site.

And the district authority, which is responsible for checking whether the site is suitable for bathing.

One step higher is the federal state of Saxony. Then Germany as a whole.

Much of what happens at these levels depends on funding decisions and regulations set at the European level. It also depends on the political agenda of the governing parties.

At European Union level, two frameworks are of key importance: The Bathing Water Directive and the Water Framework Directive.

And this is where a structural problem becomes visible.

As mentioned earlier: The official bathing water assessment is based only on two microbiological indicators: faecal bacteria that mainly signal acute infection risks.

Chemical pollutants such as pesticides, heavy metals, or PFAS are not included in this assessment. And this is despite the fact that they are, in fact, tested locally as part of the EU-wide water monitoring programme. Although it is also well known that most waters in the European Union contain a wide range of chemical pollutants.

This includes lakes, rivers, and coastal beaches, where there are thousands of officially designated bathing sites still rated as clean.

[Jingle]

[Host]

On top – as already mentioned, there are no fixed PFAS limit values for bathing waters at European Union level. Under certain circumstances, this can be problematic for human health in the long term.

But there has been some movement recently: In May 2026, the European Union adopted amendments to water legislation.

In future, member states will have to report much more detailed and more extensive data from their water monitoring programmes to the European Environment Agency.

Once these new rules are implemented at national level, more comprehensive and more comparable data should become available. This could, for the first time,

provide a clearer picture of how heavily Europe's rivers, lakes, and coastal waters are actually polluted with chemical substances. When this happens will depend on each individual country.

At the same time, there is also movement at the European Union level regarding the issue of pollutants: Several legislative reforms concerning chemical substances are currently running in parallel. Keeping track of all of this is not easy. So-called omnibus procedures play a key role in this connection. With omnibus procedures, amendments to various laws are bundled together into a single package – like flowers in a bouquet.

One of the aims is to reduce bureaucracy.

Here is an example related to PFAS: Within the scope of the Omnibus X package, new rules on food and feed safety are currently being negotiated. One of the main topics is pesticide approval procedures.

The European Commission speaks of simpler and faster processes.

But critics fear negative consequences for environmental and public health protection.

PFAS are also discussed at the European Union level. They are not formally part of these omnibus packages, though. They are instead mainly covered by separate legislative processes within European chemicals regulation.

Nevertheless it is clear: the omnibus plays an important role in how these substances are handled. For example, whether PFAS-containing pesticides may be released into the environment. Or whether they can be used in industrial processes, such as coatings for non-stick pans or as an ingredient in products like ski wax.

This also affects how much of these substances eventually end up in the environment – and potentially in bathing waters.

[Jingle]

[Host]

Elevated PFAS levels were also detected in our laboratory sample of the water we took from the Filzteich bathing area. But the Filzteich is not an isolated case. That is not only shown by our broader data analysis for this investigation.

A look at the monitoring data suggests the same:

The chemical status of many water bodies is significantly worse than the bathing water rankings suggest.

In Germany, not one single regularly monitored surface water body meets the chemical requirements of the European Water Framework Directive.

The main factors contributing to this result are long-lasting pollutants such as mercury and certain flame retardants. These were used, for example, in upholstered furniture, and have accumulated in the environment over decades – or even longer.

Pressure is therefore also growing at the European Union level to revise the bathing water rules.

[Jingle]

[Host]

Comprehensive and regular monitoring, along with strict regulation, is not only relevant for bathing waters.

I spoke with colleagues from Germany and Latvia whose work has for quite some time involved the quality of groundwater, and drinking water, as well as seawater.

[Soundbite Sophia Schwan]

My name is Sophia Schwan. I'm a local journalist and a climate reporter in Brandenburg, Germany, and I work for the Märkische Online Zeitung,

[Host]

Sophia Schwan tells me she wrote two articles at the time, both focused on PFAS. She first looked into whether there was a risk to groundwater and nearby water bodies in Bernau, and whether this could lead to contamination.

Sophia Schwan's research focused on three former landfill sites. These three disused sites could be a source of PFAS contamination.

Rainwater may have caused these industrial chemicals to enter the soil and groundwater. This might actually still be happening today.

However, targeted PFAS testing at these landfill sites has so far been rare. She finds this very surprising given what she considers to be clear signs suggesting the presence of PFAS.

Experts spoken to by the local journalist warn that climate change could exacerbate the situation – through more frequent and heavy rainfall events could accelerate the spread of these pollutants.

This shows that the costly and complex remediation of old contaminated sites is long overdue.

[Soundbite Sophia Schwan]

The case in Bernau is powerful because it makes forever chemicals a very local story, and, um, it revolves around old waste sites in and around a rapidly growing city Directly next to where people live, where they build their homes, where they go swimming, and where they get their drinking water. For the locals, the confusing part is that the authorities say there is no acute problem, and that's also important. People should not be unnecessarily alarmed, but at the same time, there are still many open questions. With PFAS, the absence of a warning does not necessarily mean the absence of pollution. Sometimes it simply means that certain substances, in this case also have not specifically been tested for because it's not legally required. And another issue is the responsibility. So one site falls under the town's responsibility, another one under the district's, and some procedures involve the state environmental agencies, and that makes the problem very slow to be resolved, technical and very expensive. Um, but for residents, it can be hard to understand who's actually responsible and also when something will finally happen because, um,

there hasn't really happened much in the last decade. The political response, at least, is now moving more towards precaution. There are calls for more transparency, more frequent testing, and also a forever chemicals register that shows possible risk sites. So in my view, the constructive solution is quite clear. Um, we should not just test what is legally required. We should test where there are plausible risks,

[Host]

Sophia Schwan explains that remediating the three contaminated sites in Bernau would be highly complex and very expensive.

At the GEAB site in the Barnim region, around 400,000 tonnes of waste is still stored to this day, including plastics, electronic waste and medical residues.

The district is responsible for the site. That the remediation would be complex and costly has been known for years:

As early as 2010, a cost of around 34 million euros was estimated. But there is still no clear timeline for a full clean-up.

And there was also another finding: after a fire, traces of PFAS were detected in the soil. These are long-lasting chemicals that hardly break down and are increasingly under environmental scrutiny.

Despite this, the official stance of the authorities is that people who go swimming or drink tap water in the Barnim region have no need to worry.

Experts spoken to by the local journalist are therefore calling for more transparency and more frequent testing.

But: why does this matter?

Clean drinking water does not necessarily mean that the wider environment is not polluted. Drinking water usually comes from deep groundwater sources, while lakes and rivers can accumulate pollutants over many years.

With population growth and the effects of climate change, pressure on water resources may increase further. So the key consideration is not only whether our drinking water today is safe.

It is also how we can prevent “forever chemicals” from becoming a much bigger problem in the future.

[Jingle]

Host]

I am already curious to see what will be revealed from Sophia Schwan's follow-up article to our data analysis

She has just submitted a request to the State Office for the Environment regarding bathing and fishing lakes in the Barnim district in the German state of Brandenburg. She wants to know whether additional measurements have been carried out, And if in that case, whether substances like PFAS and/or mercury have been detected and,

And if so, what the possible sources of these pollutants might be. The response will likely take at least four weeks. So definitely worth checking in from time to time to see what she publishes. We will certainly be following her reporting closely.

[Jingle]

At CORRECTIV.Europe, we look at topics from a Europe-wide perspective.

In the next segment, we turn to the Baltic Sea. More specifically, to Latvia. To better understand the situation on the ground, we also spoke with a colleague there.

[Soundbite Anna Liene Brokāne]

My name is Anna Liene Brokāne and I am a journalist from TVNET in Latvia. In my investigative work, I analyze how climate change and land-based runoff pollution affect the Baltic Sea ecosystem, changing the water quality of coastal bathing waters.

The most significant finding during my research was the scale of the problem. According to recent international reports, ninety-seven percent of the Baltic Sea is affected by eutrophication, while oxygen-depleted dead zones continue to expand in its deeper waters. These zones now account for about one-fifth of all marine dead zones worldwide, demonstrating a clear long-term trend of environmental degradation

[Host]

In Latvia, the effects of water pollution are particularly also visible in the sea.

In her reporting, the colleague found that 97 per cent of the Baltic Sea has so-called dead zones, directly resulting from human activity.

[Soundbite Anna Liene Brokāne]

A good local example is what many people see in Latvia almost every summer. During hot weather, the shallow Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Riga warm up quickly, triggering large blue-green algae bloom. Sometimes they are so widespread they can even be seen from space. When the blooms reach the coast, swimming restrictions may be introduced at the beaches because of potential health risk. And the problem doesn't end there. The algae eventually sink and decompose using oxygen on the seabed, which damage marine ecosystems and makes it more difficult for fish species like Baltic cod to reproduce and recover.

[Host]

One consequence is the widespread appearance of the large blue-green algae, so much that it is visible from out of space. Besides impeding our ability to swim, these also severely disrupt the ocean's ecosystem

[Soundbite Anna Liene Brokāne]

Latvia's response is part of a broader regional effort. Together with the other Baltic Sea countries, it is implementing measures under the Baltic Sea Action Plan to reduce nutrient pollution entering the sea. However, progress remains challenging

because agriculture is economically important, and reducing fertilizer runoff requires significant investment and long-term changes in farming practices. Another challenge is that protecting the Baltic Sea requires cooperation from all coastal countries. While European Union member states are implementing stricter environmental standards, Russia is not bound by EU environmental legislation, making coordinating action across the entire Baltic Sea basin more difficult.

At the same time, scientists are developing promising nature-based solutions, including cultivating mussels and algae, which can naturally absorb excess nutrient and help remove phosphorus from the marine ecosystem.

[Host]

The research of our colleague in Latvia shows that nutrients from agriculture and wastewater encourage the growth of toxic blue-green algae. In particularly hot summers, this can even lead to beach closure.

She also points out that managing pollution in the Baltic Sea region is an additional challenge for Latvia, as several countries border the sea and therefore share responsibility for its condition. To address this, the Baltic Action Plan was introduced. The report assess while EU member states are participating, Russia's involvement has so far been insufficient.

It is becoming clear from not only this report, but also the previous cases, that we also need to consider that new international standards are required for quality monitoring of our waters. This view is shared by scientist Markus Große Opphoff.

[Soundbite Expert Markus Große Ophoff]

German Original:

Weil es wäre aber auch wahnsinnig teuer, wenn wir jetzt all diese unterschiedlichen Chemikalien grundsätzlich immer untersuchen würden. Da gibt's wirklich Tausende von Chemikalien, die man sich anschauen könnte. Da wäre eher der Vorschlag, sich an Daten zu halten, die wir ohnehin schon haben aus anderen Sachen, aus Daten,

aus der Wasserrahmenrichtlinie, von den Wasserwerken, von den Flusskontrollen. Und diese Daten danach hin untersuchen: Gibt es in einem Gebiet 'ne höhere Belastung mit Chemikalien? Und dann an den Standorten gezielt Messungen machen und das wird leider bisher noch nicht gemacht. Das ist wichtig, damit wir Vorsorge haben. Es ist aber sicherlich auf Dauer auch hilfreich, wenn's so 'ne Richtlinie gibt. Alleine schon auch aus der Problematik, dass man jetzt ja nicht eins zu eins die Grenzwerte, die es für Trinkwasser gibt, auf Badegewässer übertragen kann. Beim Badewasser nehme ich deutlich kleinere Mengen auf und deshalb muss man da sicherlich nicht ganz so enge Grenzwerte ansetzen wie beim Trinkwasser. Aber es gibt leider auch einzelne Gewässer, wo das um Zehnerpotenzen überschritten ist und wo's dann wirklich problematisch wird.

English translation:

But it would also be incredibly expensive if we were to routinely test for all these different chemicals. There are literally thousands of chemicals that you could look at. A more sensible approach would be to make use of data we already have from other sources — data collected under the Water Framework Directive, from water suppliers, and from river monitoring programmes.

We should analyse those existing datasets to see whether there are areas with higher levels of chemical contamination. And then carry out targeted measurements at those specific locations. Unfortunately, that's not something that's being done yet.

That's important if we want to take a precautionary approach. In the long run, though, it would also be helpful to have specific guidelines. One reason is that you can't simply apply the drinking water limits directly to bathing waters.

When you're swimming, you ingest much smaller amounts of water, so the limit values don't necessarily need to be as strict as they are for drinking water. But unfortunately, there are also individual bodies of water where those levels are exceeded by orders of magnitude — and that's where it really becomes a problem.

[Host]

Expert Markus Große Ophoff says that comprehensive monitoring of all possible chemicals in water bodies is not really feasible, as there are thousands of potential substances and the testing involved would be extremely costly.

Instead, he calls for precautionary action to protect people and the environment by making use of existing data.

This includes information from the Water Framework Directive, water utilities and river monitoring programmes, which should be used to identify areas with elevated pollution levels – and then carry out targeted measurements in those areas.

However, Markus Große Ophoff also stresses that this cannot replace unambiguous regulations. He points out that drinking water standards cannot simply be applied to bathing waters, since, for example, the human body absorbs far smaller amounts of water from lakes or rivers than drinking water.

He also emphasises that there are individual water bodies with extremely high levels of contamination – in some cases by an order of magnitude – which can pose a health risk.

For this reason, he argues that it would be sensible to establish uniform standards and procedures, ideally also enshrined in law, to improve prevention and protection.

[Jingle]

[Host]

So to summarise, it can be said:

That on a closer inspection, the quality of bathing water in the European Union is not quite as good as the stars on the official rating might suggest. Because these ratings only reflect bacterial contamination.

Bathers often know very little about chemical pollutants. Either no checks are carried out at all. Or the results are difficult or even impossible for the public to access.

As is the case at the Filzteich. So what needs to happen?

First, we need better monitoring. It is necessary to test more regularly and more comprehensively which pollutants are actually present in our bathing waters.

Second, contaminated sites must be cleaned up. Because as long as old landfills and other polluted sites continue to release substances, they will enter soils, groundwater, lakes, and rivers.

And we need stricter rules for problematic substances such as PFAS. This is exactly what is being negotiated again at the level of the European Union this year.

In an evaluation of its own, the European Commission has also found that current rules for bathing water monitoring do protect against bacterial risks but do not adequately cover possible chemical contamination.

The Commission is therefore currently examining whether the rules should be expanded. In theory, there is an opportunity for better regulation.

But some organisations and associations expect a weakening rather than a strengthening of controls.

For example, the civil society initiative LobbyControl, together with more than 150 other organisations, warns that important environmental and health standards in Europe could be weakened.

One reason for this assumption is the pressure being exerted by right-wing populist forces and various industry sectors.

But decision-makers in Brussels and Strasbourg are not solely responsible. National governments and local authorities can also act. They help to decide how strictly rules are enforced – and whether contaminated sites are remediated.

That this is possible is shown by countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark. Whose approaches to PFAS and other pollutants are in many areas more consistent than in countries such as Germany.

[Jingle]

The contamination of the Filzteich has been known for years. Or at least, it has been known to the authorities, and therefore also to the operator of the bathing site, even if not to all visitors.

We have asked both the responsible district office and the operator of the bathing site for a statement on the results of our water samples. Both stated that the measured PFAS levels are below the guideline values recommended by the Federal Environment Agency. And therefore do not pose a health risk.

We also asked the Ministry of Health in Saxony for comment. According to the authority, there is essentially only one solution: The toxic waste from the paper industry must be removed.

Because this waste is considered one of the sources of the pollutants repeatedly detected in the water of the Filzteich.

The clean-up of the contaminated site is expected to cost around 12 million euros.

Wolfram Günther, the former environment minister of Saxony, says we shouldn't cause a panic. But that turning a blind eye isn't a solution either.

In his view, the authorities are overwhelmed. And that the district administrations do not have the resources to address these problems properly. As a result, the issue is being postponed. He argues that local authorities should not be left alone with the responsibility.

Meanwhile, summer and university holidays have started across much of Europe. And temperatures continue to rise. Not only are outdoor pools filling up. Lakes and bathing waters in nature are also packed with people trying to cool off.

[Outro + Slogan]

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