Waterkeeper Alliance Calls for Urgent Action to Strengthen and Accelerate Progress on SDG 6

Waterkeeper Alliance calls on UN Member States, UN-Water Members, and Partners to ensure clean, healthy, safe, and accessible water for all people and nature to flourish. Waterkeeper Alliance is a global movement uniting nearly 300 community-based Waterkeeper groups around the world. Our mission is to connect, support, and advocate with Waterkeeper groups to protect the right to clean water with communities worldwide. The Waterkeeper movement patrols and protects over six million square miles of rivers, lakes, and coastlines in the Americas, Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa.

UN-Water can play a critical role in safeguarding water access, ecosystems, and sustainable livelihoods through the promotion of regulation, restoration, community engagement, and investment. To achieve these goals, the UN Member States, UN-Water Members and Partners, and multilateral partners must meet the urgency of the moment by adopting the following recommendations:

Policy Recommendations for the 2026 UN-Water Conference

Priority 1: Strengthen global action to prevent and reduce toxic water pollution from plastics, PFAS, microplastics, and other emerging contaminants.

- Strengthen SDG 6.3 monitoring and reporting to better capture pollution from plastics, PFAS, microplastics, and other emerging contaminants through expanded monitoring, improved data collection, and transparent reporting.
- Advance protective water-quality standards and regulatory frameworks for emerging contaminants based on the best available science and the precautionary principle.
- Prioritize pollution prevention and source reduction, including measures to reduce the production, use, and discharge of persistent and hazardous substances and hold polluters accountable, rather than relying primarily on costly downstream treatment and remediation.
- Increase international cooperation, technical assistance, and financing to help countries monitor emerging contaminants, identify pollution sources, strengthen regulatory capacity, and prevent contamination.
- Ensure meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples, traditional fisherfolk, frontline communities, and other disproportionately affected communities in monitoring, standard-setting, pollution prevention, and remediation decisions.

Policy Rationale

Relevant 2026 UN-Water Conference Themes: Water for Planet; Water for People; Water in Multilateral Processes; Investments for Water

Pollution from plastics, PFAS, microplastics, and other persistent and emerging contaminants increasingly threatens freshwater and marine ecosystems, drinking-water sources, aquatic life, food systems, and human health. These pollutants can travel through rivers, groundwater,

wastewater, and the food chain, crossing jurisdictional and national boundaries and making prevention at the source essential.

A working group of 30 international experts from 11 countries convened by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the cancer agency of the World Health Organization, classified PFOA as carcinogenic to humans and PFOS as possibly carcinogenic to humans.
In 2023, the Forever Pollution Project documented nearly 23,000 sites across Europe were contaminated with these highly persistent toxic chemicals. Waterkeeper Alliance's monitoring further illustrates the need for action. In 2022, PFAS were detected in 83% of 114 waterways sampled across 34 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Follow-up monitoring in 2024–2025 around wastewater treatment plants and biosolids application sites detected compounds at 98% of sampled surface-water sites. These findings reflect a broader global challenge and demonstrate the importance of community-based monitoring in identifying contamination and informing policy.

Despite these risks, global water-quality monitoring and regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with these threats. Achieving SDG 6.3 will require stronger monitoring and reporting, greater regulatory capacity, and coordinated action to prevent pollution before it enters the environment. The 2026 UN-Water Conference provides an opportunity to elevate emerging contaminants within the global water agenda and mobilize commitments to improve monitoring, strengthen standards, reduce pollution at its source, and support countries and communities that lack the resources to address these contaminants.

Priority 2: Make healthy ecosystems and nature-based solutions central to water and climate resilience.

- Scale investment in nature-based solutions that protect and restore wetlands, floodplains, forests, watersheds, mangroves, and other ecosystems that improve water quality and strengthen resilience to floods, drought, storms, sea-level rise, and water scarcity.
- Integrate ecosystem protection and restoration into national climate adaptation, disaster-risk reduction, water-management, and infrastructure planning, prioritizing approaches that deliver benefits for water quality, biodiversity, climate resilience, and local livelihoods.
- Strengthen transboundary and basin-wide cooperation, including scientific collaboration, shared monitoring, data exchange, and early-warning systems for climate-related water risks.
- Direct climate and water financing toward locally appropriate and community-led nature-based solutions, particularly in vulnerable and underserved communities.
- Ensure meaningful participation and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in the development and implementation of water and climate resilience strategies.

Policy Rationale

Relevant 2026 UN-Water Conference Themes: Water for Planet; Water for Cooperation; Investments for Water

Climate change is intensifying water-related threats, including drought, flooding, extreme storms, sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, and water scarcity. Building water resilience therefore requires protecting the ecosystems that naturally store, filter, and regulate water.

Nature-based solutions, including restoring wetlands and floodplains, protecting forests and watersheds, reconnecting rivers, improving soil health, and restoring natural coastal buffers, can improve water quality, reduce flood and drought risks, store carbon, protect biodiversity, and strengthen local livelihoods. The 2026 UN-Water Conference should help move these approaches from isolated projects to a core component of national water and climate policy by mobilizing financing, strengthening cooperation, and integrating nature-based solutions into climate adaptation and water-management planning.

Priority 3: Accelerate universal and equitable access to safe water and sanitation.

- Commit to universal access to safe and effective wastewater treatment by 2040.
- Increase and better target financing for safe drinking water, wastewater treatment, sanitation, source-water protection, and the maintenance and modernization of water infrastructure.
- Mobilize a global commitment to halve untreated wastewater and achieve universal access to safe wastewater treatment, backed by sustained financing, technology transfer, and technical capacity for wastewater infrastructure.
- Prioritize communities that remain underserved or disproportionately exposed to unsafe water, including rural, low-income, Indigenous, informal, displaced, and other vulnerable populations.
- Strengthen drinking-water quality protections and source-water protection so that access to water means access to water that is safe from both traditional pollutants and emerging contaminants.
- Strengthen technical capacity, technology transfer, and locally appropriate innovation, while ensuring countries and communities have the long-term financial and institutional capacity to operate and maintain water and sanitation systems.
- Promote transparent and participatory water governance that enables communities to meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their water and sanitation services.

Policy Rationale

Relevant 2026 UN-Water Conference Themes: Water for People; Water for Prosperity; Investments for Water

Universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene remains fundamental to achieving SDG 6, protecting public health, reducing poverty, and advancing sustainable development. Yet major inequalities persist, with rural, low-income, Indigenous, displaced, and other marginalized communities often facing the greatest barriers to safe and reliable services. For example, UN data indicate only about 56% of global household wastewater was safely treated in 2024.

Closing these gaps requires more than expanding physical infrastructure. UN Member States, UN-Water Members, and Partners must invest in source-water protection, water-quality monitoring, wastewater treatment, system maintenance, technical capacity, and strong public institutions capable of sustaining services over the long term. The 2026 UN-Water Conference should mobilize financing and commitments that prioritize communities with the greatest unmet needs while ensuring investments produce safe, affordable, resilient, and sustainable water and sanitation services.

Priority 4: Protect and restore wetlands, rivers, and connected freshwater ecosystems.

- Commit to halting and reversing the loss and degradation of wetlands, rivers, floodplains, lakes, and other freshwater ecosystems, including by preventing drainage, destructive land conversion, pollution, and unsustainable water withdrawals.
- Protect environmental flows and freshwater connectivity and integrate ecosystem needs into water allocation, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure decisions.
- Apply basin-wide and source-to-sea approaches that recognize the connections among headwaters, rivers, floodplains, wetlands, groundwater, deltas, estuaries, and coastal ecosystems.
- Assess the cumulative impacts of dams and other water infrastructure at the basin level, protect remaining free-flowing rivers, avoid projects that would cause significant ecosystem harm, and support removal of obsolete or particularly damaging barriers where removal would restore ecological connectivity.
- Support implementation of the Freshwater Challenge and other international commitments to restore degraded rivers and wetlands and translate global restoration targets into funded national and basin-level action.
- Mobilize financing for freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration, including community-led conservation and restoration.
- Respect the rights, knowledge, and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in freshwater ecosystem protection, restoration, and management.

Policy Rationale

Relevant 2026 UN Water Conference Themes: Water for Planet; Water for Prosperity; Water for Cooperation; Water in Multilateral Processes

Healthy freshwater ecosystems are essential to achieving SDG 6.6 and underpin water security, biodiversity, food systems, climate resilience, and livelihoods. Wetlands, rivers, floodplains, lakes, peatlands, and connected coastal ecosystems filter pollutants, replenish groundwater, store carbon, provide habitat, sustain fisheries, and protect communities from floods, droughts, storms, and erosion.

These ecosystems continue to be degraded by pollution, water withdrawals, land conversion, dams, infrastructure development, and altered river flows. Because impacts throughout a watershed are interconnected, freshwater protection cannot be achieved through isolated projects. The Conference is a crucial opportunity to help translate existing international commitments into implementation. Protecting remaining healthy ecosystems while restoring degraded ones should be treated as a core water-security investment rather than solely as a conservation objective.