

Pressrelease

Gateway to the Rhine open for salmon

Paris, Berlin, Bern, 15.11.2018

Today the Netherlands is celebrating the opening of the storm surge barrier on the Haringvliet. That is where one of the three branches of the Rhine flows out into the North Sea. Until now, the storm surge barrier was a major obstacle to the passage of salmon into the Rhine delta. Its partial opening greatly increases the chance that salmon and other “long distance migratory fish” will gain access to the Rhine catchment area.

Following the partial opening of the Haringvliet locks and a appeal by the EU, major pressure from Europeenvironmental NGOs expect increased political pressure on France on the measures long-since agreed upon, to implement free-flow of the Rhine.

“Today’s partial opening of the Haringvliet barriers proves that tenacity and commitment to conservation of nature and the environment can be effective”, Jörg Lange of the Regional Water Working Group comments. The partial opening of the Haringvliet barriers has figured on the long list of measures advocated by environmental associations and the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR) for decades. Most recently, in 2010/2011 the project was again on a cliff edge and only massive political pressure exerted by the riparian States of the Rhine now gives us occasion to celebrate.

“It is high time for France too to respond to the great challenges on the Upper Rhine, for example by building fish ladders enabling migratory fish like salmon to make their way up the Rhine at long last,” in the words of Roberto Epple of the European Rivers Network.

The **15th Rhine Ministerial Conference held on 28 October 2013 in Basel** admittedly confirmed the goal of enabling the Atlantic salmon to make its way back to Basel by 2020. “To that end, existing obstacles must be removed and the ecological situation of the Rhine improved”, as the ICPR press release stated at the time.

However, in the southern reaches of the Upper Rhine France is still making no real progress with the construction of fish ladders at the hydropower plants operated by the State-owned energy group Electricité de France (EDF). Admittedly, the mobile fish transit solution, i.e. transport of salmon by “taxi ship” to Basel planned by EDF but judged unworkable by international experts has now been withdrawn. But no effective alternative plan has been put forward as yet by France and EDF to enable salmon and other migratory fish to swim unaided once again back to their spawning grounds on the southern reaches of the Upper Rhine and in Switzerland.

The lack of action on the part of EDF might lead to a situation in which the statutory requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) are missed by a wide margin. Back in the year 2000, the WFD gave the EU Member States time to implement free passage through the river barriers under normal circumstances by the year 2015. Two extensions until 2021 and then again until 2027 are permitted, but only under justified exceptional circumstances.

The environmental associations in the Rhine catchment area have therefore registered an appeal seeking to oblige the EU Commission to open proceedings against the French Republic for breach of treaty obligations because of failure to comply with the WFD.

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Background

The Haringvliet Barrier (built between 1956 and 1970) is one kilometre long and links the islands of Voorne-Putten and Goeree-Overflakkee near Rotterdam. The Haringvliet barrier is the barrier structure in this barrage between the North Sea and the Haringvliet and one of the thirteen storm surge barriers that form part of the Delta Works. It maintains a constant water level in the Haringvliet and the associated rivers to protect the hinterland against flooding from the sea. At ebb tide, 70% of the river water from the Rhine and Meuse is discharged through the barrier. That is why the Haringvliet barrier is sometimes also called Europe’s water tap. Until now, the barriers have separated the Haringvliet from the North Sea. As a result there is fresh water in the Haringvliet and scarcely any tides. With effect from 15.11. 2018, the barriers are to remain partially open, so enabling animals such as salmon to migrate back into the Rhine.

The Netherlands made 55 million euros available to open the Haringvliet barriers for migratory fish and pay for essential accompanying measures.