Water: nutrient and heavy metal pollution 'decoupling' from growth

European Environment Agency

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European households are generating lower levels of nutrient pollution in water, despite a growing population. In a similar example of 'absolute decoupling', levels of some pollutants from agriculture and manufacturing have fallen in recent years, while the economic production of these sectors has grown.

These trends are highlighted in a series of new indicators published by the European Environment Agency (EEA), which look at various economic aspects of water pollution and water use in Europe.

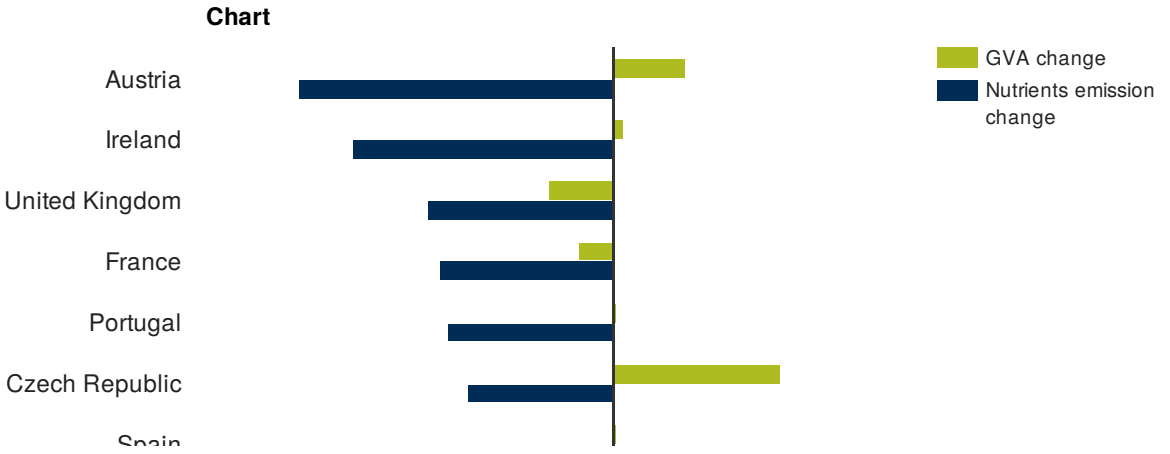
The three indicators look at pollutant emissions from the agricultural sector, households and manufacturing industries, comparing this pollution to economic factors.

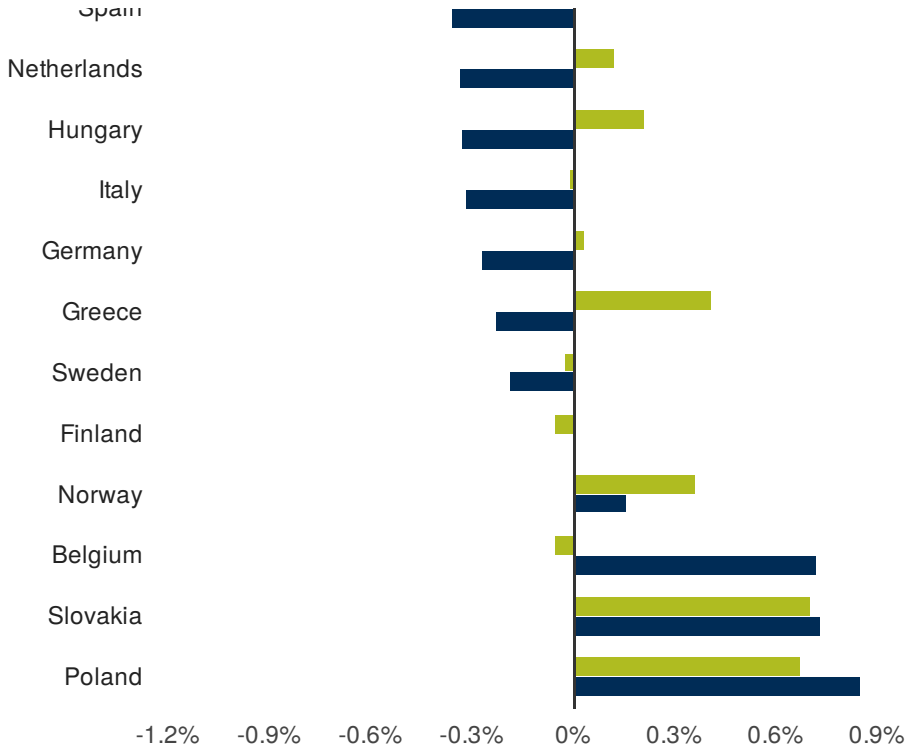
'Absolute decoupling' is the implicit aim of many environmental policies, meaning economic growth continues while environmental impacts decrease. 'Relative decoupling' is often used to describe a situation where environmental impacts continue to increase, but at a lower rate than growth.

The data suggests that Europe is generally moving in the right direction in reducing nutrient pollution of water, a major cause of eutrophication. It is still a significant pollution problem, however. Manufacturing industries have also significantly cut their emissions of heavy metals to water between 2004 and 2010, the data shows.

However, at the national level a handful of countries do not show an absolute decoupling trend, either with falling rates of productivity or increasing pollutant emission levels.

The interactive graph below have been made using DaViz, an online plug-in developed by the EEA. It is free and open source. **For more interactive graphs, check the indicators below.**





The chart displays changes in emission in water of nutrient equivalents from manufacturing (NACE , division 10-33), and the economic output of manufacturing expressed as the gross value added (GVA) in Europe between 2004 and 2010. Changes are expressed in %, where values for 2004=100 %. Data from food industry are not included for Norway due to discrepancy between coverage for economic data (GVA) and emission data for facilities where main activity is intensive aquaculture.

Data sources:

a. DG ENV. The European Pollutant Release and Transfer Register (E-PRTR), Member States reporting under Article 7 of Regulation (EC) No 166/2006

b. Eurostat. National Accounts by 31 branches - aggregates at current prices c. EEA – Indicator WREI003

Explore chart interactively

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See all indicators

- WREI001 Emission intensity agriculture
- WREI002 Emission intensity domestic sector
- WREI003 Emission intensity manufacturing industry

Related content

Related briefings

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Related indicators

Emission intensity of manufacturing industries in Europe [https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/emission-intensity-of-manufacturing-industries/assessment]

Emission intensity of the domestic sector in Europe [https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/emission-intensity-of-domestic-sector/assessment]

Emission intensity of agriculture in Europe [https://www.eea.europa.eu/data-and-maps/indicators/untitled-indemission-intensity-of-agriculture/assessment]

See also

Countries' perspectives on SOER 2015 - Freshwater cross-country comparison [https://www.eea.europa.eu/soer-2015/countries-comparison/freshwater/country-perspectives]

Temporal coverage

2004-2010

Published on 24 Feb 2014