

Statement Manfred Seitz, Director General of the Secretariat of the Danube Commission

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“Danube Navigation 2026 and Climate Change Adaptation”

Dear Ms Coordinator Margarida Marques, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

In 2021 at a workshop organised in Budapest, Professor Mauser of the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich told us:

“Climate change in the Danube basin has twice the magnitude of the global average. Even an optimistic 1.5 degree global scenario means 3 degrees of warming in the Danube basin.”

Many of us saw this as a warning for a rather distant future, and hardly anyone could imagine what global warming would actually mean for the region in practical terms. The drought and heatwave of 2026 have now given us a foretaste of the effects of climate change on the Danube region.

In 2024, 46.9 million tonnes were transported on the Danube and the Sava. To keep and expand this market, Danube navigation faces a demanding agenda:

- reducing administrative barriers – same river, same rules;
- modernising the fleet towards zero emissions, digitalisation and preparing for automation;
- stronger cross-border cooperation, a skilled workforce and capable administrations;
- closing the backlog in fairway maintenance and infrastructure investment.

But one challenge decides whether all the others can be met: reliable fairway conditions. When depth is limited, vessels sail with reduced draught, costs per tonne rise, and the river loses its place in managed supply chains.

This year, the Danube reached historic low discharge volumes and consequently low water depths along its entire length.

- At Mohács and Batina, water levels fell almost 80 centimetres below the previous historical minimum.
- In July, the Low Navigable Water Level was not reached on a single day at six gauges from Kelheim to Silistra.
- Even in January, upper Danube gauges stayed below it for the whole month.

Low water is no longer a late-summer phenomenon. It comes earlier the year, lasts longer (since mid June till today and no relief in sight) and is more severe.

In July, loaded vessels going downstream sailed with only 130 to 150 centimetres of draught, compared to 160 to 180 a year earlier. Port volumes fell by almost a third in Hungary and by a quarter in Ukraine.

And since 13 August, the Danube has been closed to navigation at Paks, where Hungary built a bottom sill under emergency legislation to secure the cooling water supply of the nuclear power plant. The Secretariat has been in continuous contact with the Hungarian authorities, the ICPDR and the European Commission.

Paks shows how quickly climate stress turns into competing demands on the same water – and why the Danube needs a coordinated framework for fighting climate change rather than isolated emergency responses.

The waterway administrations reacted with great effort: about 683,000 cubic metres dredged in five countries, daily surveys, updated charts, virtual AIS buoys and daily cross-border data exchange. I thank them.

But despite all efforts made, especially in the last years, it was still more of a reaction, certainly much better planned and executed than in previous years. What we need for the future is a comprehensive long-term and Danube-wide strategy.

The way forward: climate change creates new realities

Our response must follow three lines:

- **Infrastructure:** eliminating bottlenecks through national and EU funds from 2027, and joint projects of the waterway administrations under CEF 3 from 2028 to 2034, based on the Joint Statement 2.0 to ensure Good Navigation Status on the entire course of the Danube and to meet compliance with the Regulation (EU) 2024/1679.
- **Maintenance:** year-round monitoring, proactive dredging and marking, a defined deep fairway channel, priorities by levels of service, and flexible infrastructure – the lower the discharge, the higher the regulation intensity.
- **Communication:** direct channels to operators and captains, and strict enforcement of draught limits at critical sections.

To facilitate this, the Secretariat of the Danube Commission will therefore propose to its member states to jointly elaborate an Action Plan for adapting Danube navigation to climate change impact. It will deliver:

- a common Danube-wide analysis based on harmonised data;
- resilience targets expressed as fairway availability in days per year;
- a harmonised catalogue of measures – maintenance, flexible infrastructure, standards, information services, fleet and logistics, and governance;
- the basis for a joint CEF 3 investment programme following the FAIRway Danube model, and one consistent line towards the European Commission.

Its methodological anchor is the Joint Statement 2.0, adopted by the Danube Commission, the ICPDR and the Sava Commission: the river corridor managed as one system, with waterways fit for purpose and fit for the future. For waterway administrations, this means **dynamic river management** – regulation follows actual and projected discharge, not a fixed reference level. **The Action Plan will take this from pilots to Danube-wide practice.**

We will present the proposal for starting the work on such an Action Plan to the Technical Working Group on 10 to 12 November 2026 – while continuing to promote the decarbonization of vessels and ports.

Ladies and gentlemen,

From the annus horribilis 2026 we have learnt one lesson above all: the severe negative impact of climate change is not to come in 2050 or 2070 – it came already in 2026, and it can come again any time.

The damage is done. Its cost is being paid today – by shipping companies, by ports and by industry.

For the politicians and administrations viewpoint this means that we have to act now – in a coordinated and targeted way; together and with a concrete plan, before the next annus horribilis comes back again.

The Danube Commission is ready to be the instrument for this – supporting the Danube states, and working closed together with the European Commission in building a resilient Danube waterway.

Let us make sure that 2026 is remembered as the year we began to act together.

Thank you for your attention.

Delivered in Brussels, 1 October 2026