

Green water management in El Prat (Spain) - A success story

December 2020

El Prat de Llobregat is part of the Barcelona metropolitan area and the only municipality located entirely in the Delta del Llobregat. Water has shaped all aspects of life in the municipality since its foundation in the mid-18th century.

In 1979, after 40 years of undemocratic local government, and against all odds, the citizens of El Prat voted in a party which a short time later became Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV). Over 40 years later, ICV (now Esquerra Verda) continues to enjoy the confidence of El Prat, the only Spanish municipality in which the Green party (and its predecessor) has enjoyed such a long, unbroken period as the ruling party.

In the late 1970s, when the Greens first came into government in the municipality, the outlook for water in the area was bleak. The Llobregat river was essentially an open sewer, lifeless and foul smelling, swimming was forbidden due to excessive pollution, marshes and wetlands were under enormous human pressure from activities including hunting, irrigation canals were full of filth, the upper aquifer could not be used for any purpose, and the lower one was disappearing and becoming more saline. In addition, the municipal water service, created in 1959, could not meet the minimum quality and quantity requirements for domestic use. Lastly, the city suffered flooding to a depth of up to 50cm several times a year due to lack of capacity within the drainage system.

The new government had many pressing matters to deal with, but the water situation was one of its top priorities. There were various reasons for this, including the desire to improve quality of life, environmental quality, and the city's image, and the wish to attract private investment. A number of programmes and initiatives were key to turning the situation around, and they remain important to this day.

First, the creation of a community of aquifer users, the first of its kind in Spain, consisting of government bodies and large consumers with previously acquired extraction rights. The purpose of the newly founded community was to monitor the situation, reduce existing extractions, and prohibit new ones. It was also charged with putting in place the conditions to, later, reverse the salinisation of the lower aquifer through the construction of a hydraulic barrier using the water from the tertiary treatment system of the Baix Llobregat wastewater treatment plant. In addition, due to its capacity and legitimacy, the community was made responsible for aquifer protection in relation to developments under the Delta Plan (covering the expansion of the Port of Barcelona, high-speed rail development, the expansion of Barcelona-El Prat airport, and especially the construction of the underground train line from Barcelona to the airport). In addition,

FUNDACIÓ NOUS HORIZONS

Sergi Alegre

sergi.alegre.calero@gmail.com



GEF GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

Visit our website to find out more:

 gef.eu

Follow our social media to stay informed about our latest activities and events taking place all over Europe



GEF_Europe



GreenEuropeanFoundation



GEF_Europe



a notable effort has been made to recover the upper aquifer, whose waters are primarily used for cleaning and irrigation in a large part of the city.

Second, the complete renovation of the city's entire drainage system, financed primarily by EU funds, and the introduction of a separate water system in new urban areas, especially those primarily used for commercial and industrial purposes. The construction of anti-CSO (combined sewer overflow) tanks was also crucial in order to prevent the arrival of water from combined sewer systems into bodies of water, even in the event of serious flooding linked to severe weather phenomena.

Third, the construction of a major sewage treatment plant incorporating a tertiary treatment system. This allowed the Llobregat river to regain its biological diversity, including otters, and the beach at El Prat to obtain the Blue Flag award. In addition, in the event of severe drought, the plant can supply the final stretch of the river with water, irrigate the agricultural area of Baix Llobregat, and feed various natural areas. Last but not least, as previously mentioned, the plant is able to maintain a hydraulic barrier that prevents saline water penetration into the lower aquifer.

Fourth, the creation of the Consorci per a la Protecció i Gestió dels Espais Naturals del Delta del Llobregat. This public institution is responsible for the management and protection of the delta's natural heritage, which receives more than 60,000 visitors per year. These spaces include nature protection areas that are part of the Natura 2000 network, Special Protection Areas (ZEPA) set up to safeguard the habitats of migratory and threatened birds, and areas of natural interest regulated by the Generalitat de Catalunya.

Lastly, the transformation of the water service provider into a wholly public-owned, municipal company with an efficient and effective management model. The company operates according to the fundamental principle that water is a scarce common good of great environmental value. It supplies not only the population of El Prat but also the airport and the Port of Barcelona, as well as a significant number of companies. The company's performance, in relation to both engineering projects and awareness programmes, is encouraging: El Prat has the lowest percentage of distribution losses and water consumption per inhabitant (at around 90 litres per person per day) in Catalonia. It is doing equally well from a social perspective: company policy prevents cutting off customers who are behind with their bills due to an inability to pay, and El Prat residents pay an average of 30 per cent less for water than those who live in the rest of the metropolitan area. The latter are served by a private company that has repeatedly tried to buy the municipal company, and thus eliminate the only example of a public company successfully demonstrating that water is not a business. A crucial aspect from a political point of view is that, all political parties were represented on the board of the company from its inception, even though this is not a legal obligation in Spain. The result of this policy is that the vast majority of the company's strategic decisions have been taken unanimously, and, as a result, water policy has not been an arena of political confrontation.

On the basis of the current situation, we can proudly say that El Prat under the Greens is a model for the management of wastewater, natural water (river, canals, and lagoons), agricultural irrigation, groundwater, and drinking water. This is thanks to an effective, efficient, and economically and socially sustainable management model which remains at the service of the residents of El Prat.



Green European Foundation
Rue du Fossé 3, L-1536 Luxembourg
Brussels Office: Mundo Madou
Avenue des Arts 7-8
1210 Brussels - Belgium



STUDY & DEBATE

Tel.: +32 (0) 2 329 00 50
Email: info@gef.eu

With the financial support of the European Parliament to the Green European Foundation.