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**United Nations
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**United Nations Environment Assembly of the
United Nations Environment Programme
Third session**

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Item 5 of the provisional agenda*

**Performance of the programme of work and budget,
including implementation of the resolutions of the
Environment Assembly**

**Progress made pursuant to the Governing Council decision 27/3
on international water quality guidelines for ecosystems**

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

In its decision 27/3, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme requested the Executive Director, in partnership with Governments and other stakeholders, to develop international water quality guidelines for ecosystems for voluntary use to support the development of national standards, policies and frameworks, while integrating, as appropriate, all relevant aspects of water management; encouraged Governments, scientific institutions, United Nations agencies and other relevant organizations to participate actively in developing the water quality guidelines; invited Governments and others in a position to do so to technically and financially support the process for the development of international water quality guidelines; and requested the Executive Director to report to the governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme at its next session on the implementation of the decision.

At a side event at the second session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, the secretariat presented draft international water quality guidelines for feedback and review.¹ Subsequently, in accordance with the programme of work for the period 2016–2017, national and regional consultations were undertaken with the participation of a total of 61 countries. Based on the feedback received, the framework for freshwater ecosystem management was finalized for presentation to the United Nations Environment Assembly at its third session.

* UNEP/EA.3/1.

¹ http://www.unep.org/sites/default/files/Documents/20160315_iwqges_pd_final.pdf.

I. Introduction

1. In its decision 27/3, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme, among other things, requested the Executive Director, in partnership with Governments and other stakeholders, to develop international water quality guidelines for ecosystems for voluntary use to support the development of national standards, policies and frameworks, while integrating, as appropriate, all relevant aspects of water management.

2. The present report provides information on the implementation of the decision together with suggested action.

II. Progress in the implementation of decision 27/3

3. Draft international water quality guidelines for ecosystems were developed between May 2013 and March 2016 and submitted for consideration at regional consultations. In accordance with paragraph 4 of decision 27/3, an interim report on the guidelines was presented at a side event at the second session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, on the understanding that the guidelines would be subject to further extensive regional and international consideration and consultation processes. Three documents were produced for the regional consultations: an executive summary; a report on the policy-oriented approach to the guidelines; and a report providing the scientific background and a technical guide. Regional consultations were held between May 2016 and January 2017, and consisted primarily of five workshops convened to coincide with regional and global conferences and meetings. In addition, feedback was solicited from more than 40 developed and developing countries from every region. Between May and October 2017, the feedback was reviewed and contributed to the finalization of four volumes of a framework for freshwater ecosystem management: volume 1, entitled “An overview and guide towards implementing the 2030 Agenda”; volume 2, entitled “A country guide to classification and target-setting”; volume 3, comprising a compilation of case studies; and volume 4, providing a scientific background on monitoring and assessment. The main changes to the ongoing work resulting from the feedback received included bringing activities in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and reframing the international water quality guidelines as a framework for freshwater ecosystem management thereby providing a better description of its core purpose and function. That approach is in line with the wording of Governing Council decision 27/3, namely “to support the development of national standards, policies and frameworks, taking into account existing information while integrating, as appropriate, all relevant aspects of water management”. The development of the framework was led by the United Nations Environment Programme in close consultation and collaboration with technical and policy experts. A drafting group was formed comprising technical experts from different organizations, as well as review and advisory groups comprising both national policymakers and globally recognized technical experts from the water sector. Additional regional consultations on the draft water quality framework were undertaken before finalization.

4. In relation to the programme of work for the period 2016–2017, by June 2017 a total of 61 countries – against a target of 8 – had shown an interest in, and had been consulted in the development of, the water quality framework with the assistance of the Environment Programme.

III. Recommendations and suggested action

5. The development of the framework for freshwater ecosystem management has involved approximately 100 individuals, comprising scientists, practitioners, and United Nations and Government staff as authors, reviewers or participants in workshops as part of the regional consultations, over a period of several years.

6. While volume 1 of the framework for freshwater ecosystem management provides an overview of the framework, volume 2 is a more technical guide, expanding on certain aspects of the framework in relation to the classification of ecosystems and the setting of targets for ecological status, which were deemed to be the most relevant aspects for countries initiating their reporting on national progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Representatives of member States participating in the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly may wish to discuss the demand for the production of additional technical guides relating to other parts of the framework.

7. The framework for freshwater ecosystem management supports the overarching theme of pollution of the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly, as well as the Aichi Biodiversity Targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and a number of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 6.3, on wastewater treatment and ambient water

quality, and target 6.6, on freshwater ecosystems. It is therefore recommended that the United Nations Environment Assembly consider encouraging and supporting countries to use the framework to develop their own water quality guidelines for ecosystems, monitoring and management programmes, and associated enabling environment.

8. The United Nations Environment Assembly may wish:

(a) To take note of progress achieved in the implementation of Governing Council decision 27/3 with regard to the development of international water quality guidelines for ecosystems for voluntary use to support the development of national standards, policies and frameworks;

(b) To acknowledge the central importance of sound freshwater ecosystem management for human health and livelihoods, and its consequent importance in environmental, social and economic development;

(c) To encourage countries to adopt the framework for freshwater ecosystem management in the creation of national standards and guidelines for freshwater ecosystem management, and for the achievement of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals and the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
