

The river after Schweizerhalle

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The Rhine that flows past the ports today differs profoundly from the river of 1986. Part G described how the fire at Schweizerhalle on 1 November 1986 poisoned the river over hundreds of kilometres and how the Rhine Action Programme of 1987 set the goal of bringing the salmon back by the year 2000.¹ The measures that followed reduced industrial and municipal discharges, introduced an international warning and alarm plan and led to the construction of wastewater treatment plants along the river. As the water quality of the Rhine improved markedly, many species that had disappeared returned.²

The salmon remain the symbol of this recovery and of its limits. Salmon have returned to tributaries of the lower and middle Rhine through stocking programmes and the construction of fish passes. Their migration to the upper river remains obstructed by the dams of the hydroelectric plants on the Upper Rhine between Strasbourg and Basel, where fish passes have been built at the lower dams of Iffezheim, Gamsheim and Strasbourg, while those at the plants further upstream are still planned or under construction. Individual salmon have nonetheless been observed near Basel in recent decades, which has been celebrated as a sign of progress.³

In February 2020, the ministers of the Rhine states adopted the programme "Rhine 2040", which sets the goals for the coming decades. It aims at further reducing micropollutants, including residues of pharmaceuticals, at restoring the ecological continuity of the river for migratory fish and at adapting the river system to the effects of climate change, including floods and low water.⁴ The reduction of micropollutants concerns the Basel region directly because of its pharmaceutical industry. Switzerland has introduced a programme for upgrading selected wastewater treatment plants with an additional treatment stage to remove micropollutants, financed by a federal levy on wastewater.⁵

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The ecological recovery of the Rhine has an economic dimension that is easily overlooked. A clean river is a precondition for the drinking water supply of millions of people downstream, for the acceptance of industrial activity along its banks and for the use of the river for leisure, which has transformed the riverside of Basel into one of the most popular public spaces of the city. For the chemical and pharmaceutical groups of Basel, the history of Schweizerhalle remains a reminder that the legal and reputational risks of environmental damage can exceed the cost of prevention many times over.⁶

1 Notes

1. See Part G, Chapter I, sections "Schweizerhalle, 1 November 1986" and "The regulatory consequences of Schweizerhalle". ↩
2. On the improvement of water quality in the Rhine since the 1980s and the return of species, see the ICPR balance reports on the Rhine Action Programme and on the programme "Rhine 2020". To be verified. ↩
3. On the fish passes at Iffezheim (2000), Gamsheim (2006) and Strasbourg (2016) and the planned passages at Gerstheim, Rhinau, Marckolsheim and Vogelgrun, and on reported sightings of salmon near Basel, see the ICPR publications on the Master Plan Migratory Fish Rhine. Dates and status to be verified. ↩
4. Programme "Rhine 2040", adopted by the Conference of Rhine Ministers in Amsterdam on 13 February 2020; see the ICPR publication of the programme. To be verified. ↩
5. On the upgrade of Swiss wastewater treatment plants for the elimination of micropollutants under the revised Water Protection Act (in force since 1 January 2016) and the Water Protection Ordinance, financed by a federal wastewater levy, see the publications of the Federal Office for the Environment. To be verified. ↩
6. On the significance of the Rhine for drinking water supply in the riparian states and on the role of the International Association of Waterworks in the Rhine Catchment Area (IAWR), see the publications of the IAWR and the ICPR. To be verified. ↩

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