

Second-highest water stress, groundwater failing?

Testing the Council's figures on Malta's water against the EEA and Eurostat

THE CLAIM UNDER REVIEW

“...the seasonal Water Exploitation Index Plus (WEI+), which reached 66.7% in the third quarter of 2023...”

Council of the European Union, draft Recommendation on Malta, 3 July 2026, recital (30).
“...the second-highest level among EU Member States.”

VERDICT: LARGELY SUPPORTED

All figures reproduce; ranking and one basis are caveated

Version 1.0 · 15 October 2026

Status: no right of reply needed

Prepared from public sources, EEA and Eurostat data.

Repository: github.com/leandergrech/Mizien

MIZIEN · AN INDEPENDENT FACT-CHECKING PROJECT

Contest a verdict, with evidence: github.com/leandergrech/Mizien/issues

TL;DR

The Council of the European Union’s draft Recommendation on Malta (3 July 2026, recital 30) says that Malta’s seasonal **Water Exploitation Index Plus (WEI+)** “**reached 66.7% in the third quarter of 2023, the second-highest level among EU Member States**”, and, citing Malta’s Third River Basin Management Plan, that only 58% of surface water bodies (by number) reached good or high ecological status, 45% good chemical status, and that 82% of groundwater bodies (by area) failed good quantitative status and 100% failed good chemical status [1]. We reproduced each figure from the European Environment Agency (EEA) and Eurostat.

1

The water-stress figure is the EEA’s, and the ranking holds. The EEA’s 2023 chart gives Malta 66.7% in Q3; only Cyprus (92.1%) is higher, and Greece is next at 37.4% [2]. Only Cyprus and Malta reach Eurostat’s 40% line for severe scarcity [3].

2

Surface water: the percentages reproduce, but ‘by number’ matters. 11 of 19 bodies are good or high (58%) [4]. Nine coastal bodies hold 99.96% of the area; by area the figure is 97%.

3

The 45% for chemical status counts the territorial waters. 9 of 20 bodies are good (45%); the 20th is the territorial sea, whose status is ‘Unknown’. Without it, 9 of 19 is 47%.

4

Groundwater: 82% and 100% reproduce. 292.5 of 356.9 km² is in poor quantitative status (82%); 4 of 15 bodies by number. All 15 are in poor chemical status [4].

5

Verdict: largely supported (high confidence). Caveats: the ranking depends on the series, the 45% basis is unstated, and we did not read the plan itself.

THIS CLAIM

SUPPORTED

LARGELY SUPPORTED

NOT SUBSTANTIATED

MISLEADING

CONTRADICTED

66.7%

Malta’s worst-quarter WEI+ in 2023 (Q3); EU second-highest after Cyprus (92.1%)

58%

of 19 surface water bodies at good or high ecological status (11); 97% by area

82%

of groundwater area in poor quantitative status (4 of 15 bodies)

100%

of groundwater bodies in poor chemical status (15 of 15)

WHAT WOULD MAKE IT ‘SUPPORTED’

The plan’s own tables showing the same counts and bases, and an explanation of the EEA–Eurostat gap for Romania.

WHAT WOULD LOWER IT

A plan version with different counts, or a corrected series that moves Malta out of the top two.

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1 The claim and its source	5 Where the evidence points different ways
2 Method	6 Testing the claim
3 Water scarcity: the WEI+ figure	7 Verdict and requests for evidence
4 Water bodies: status counts	8 Limitations

1

The claim and its source

The wording is recital (30) of the draft Council Recommendation on Malta’s economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies, document 11130/26 of 3 July 2026 (PDF p. 16 of 22), a General Secretariat note to the Council committees [1]. It is a draft; we did not find the adopted text. The Council relays figures from the Commission’s 2026 country report and from Malta’s Third River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), neither of which we read.

Council’s words (recital 30)	Basis given
“the seasonal Water Exploitation Index Plus (WEI+), which reached 66.7% in the third quarter of 2023, the second-highest level among EU Member States, indicating severe water scarcity”	None named
“only 58% of surface water bodies (by number) attained good or high ecological status, while just 45% met good chemical status”	Third RBMP; ‘by number’ stated for the first figure only
“82% of groundwater bodies (by area) failed to achieve good quantitative status, and 100% did not meet good chemical status”	Third RBMP; ‘by area’ stated for the first figure only

SCOPE NOTE
We test the numbers in the sentences above. The recital’s other sentences (pressures, wastewater agglomerations, policy recommendations) are not rated. The Council is relaying other bodies’ data, so a difference from the Commission’s or Malta’s own documents would not be an error by Malta. The check concerns the statement, not any person.

2

Method

Question. Do the cited figures match the official data, and do the stated bases (‘seasonal’, ‘by number’, ‘by area’) change what they mean?

Evidence. The EEA’s indicator chart of each country’s worst seasonal WEI+ in 2023 [2]; Eurostat’s annual WEI+ (sdg_06_60) and its metadata [3]; the EEA’s WISE database of Malta’s 2022 Water Framework Directive reporting, which holds each water body’s status and area [4]; and the Energy and Water Agency’s 2024 technical document on groundwater levels [5]. We recomputed every share in *tools/cc-118-report/calc.py* from *data/cc-118/* (source URLs and retrieval date in each file). Because the plan itself was refused to scripts, we use the WISE copy of Malta’s reporting as the stand-in; that the Council’s percentages come out exactly is the evidence they share a source.

Grades. All sources are official statistics or regulator data (grade C). Water-body status is self-reported by Malta to the EEA. No peer-reviewed paper is needed to reproduce the counts; two reviews give context [6, 7].

3

Water scarcity: the WEI+ figure

WEI+ is water consumption (abstraction less return flows) as a percentage of renewable freshwater resources. Eurostat’s metadata treats values above 20% as a sign of scarcity and 40% or more as severe scarcity, and warns that annual national values “may therefore mask water stress, which occurs on a seasonal or regional basis” [3].

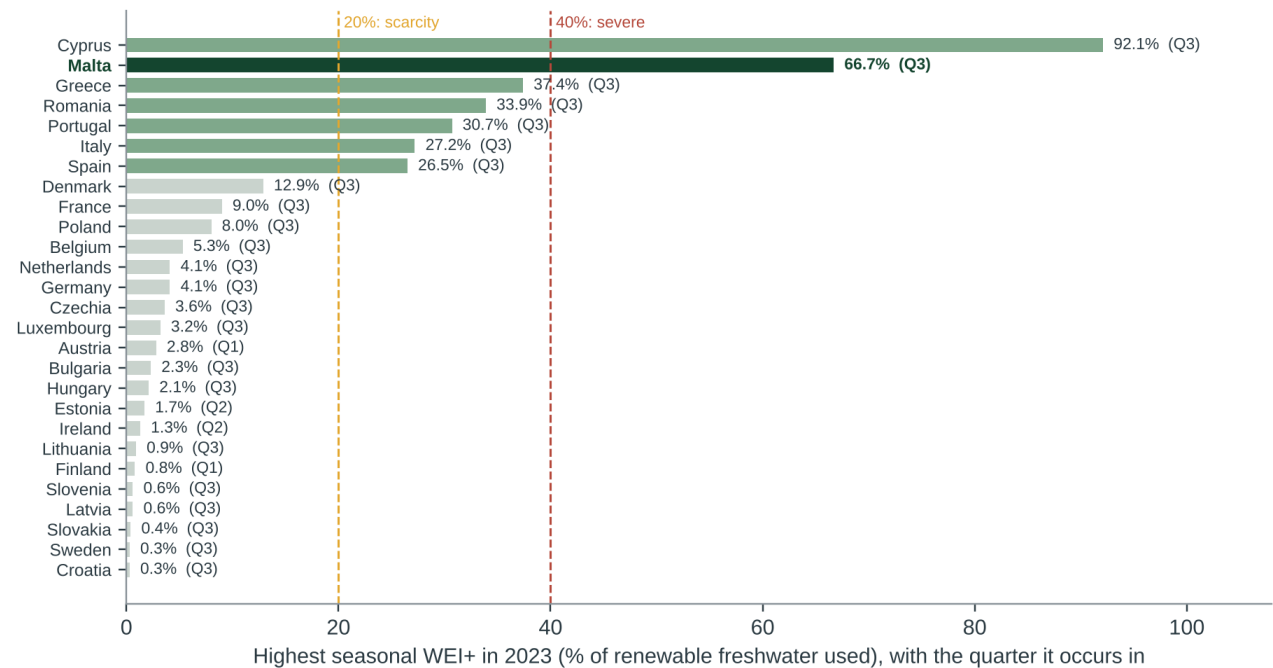


Figure 1. Highest seasonal WEI+ in 2023 for the 27 EU Member States, with the quarter in which it occurs. Source: EEA indicator ‘Worst seasonal water scarcity conditions’ (chart data, modified 28 Nov 2025) [2]; thresholds from Eurostat metadata [3].

Measure (2023)	Malta	Comparison	Source
Worst seasonal WEI+ (EEA chart)	66.7% (Q3), rank 2 of 27	Cyprus 92.1%; Greece 37.4%; Romania 33.9%	EEA [2]
Annual WEI+ (Eurostat VAL_A)	30.1%, rank 3	Cyprus 75.3%; Romania 47.4%	Eurostat [3]
Four-year average (Eurostat AVG_4Y)	33.4%, rank 2	Cyprus 72.2%; Romania 27.9%	Eurostat [3]

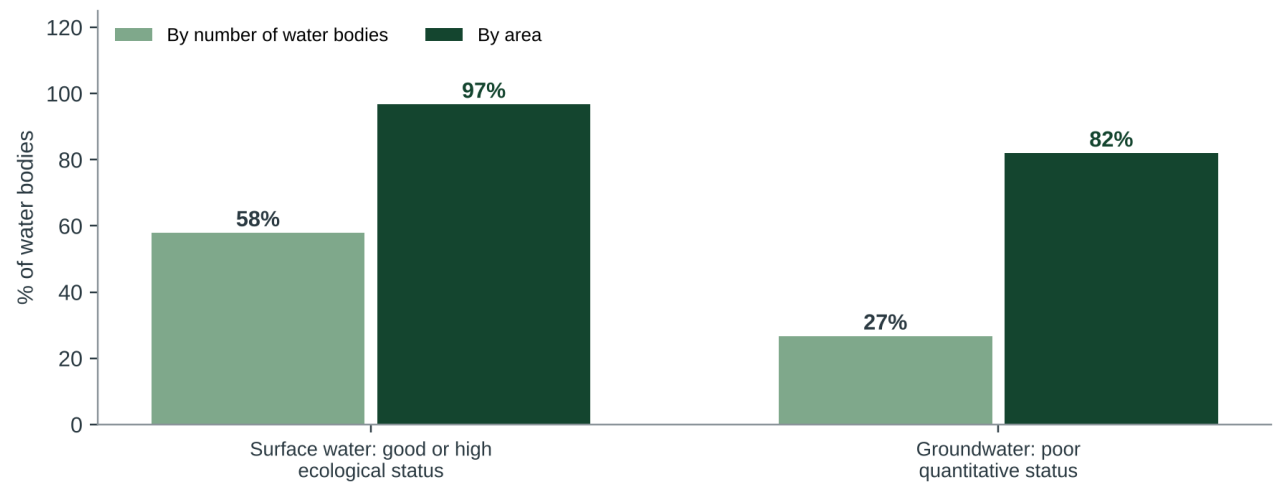
The Council’s number is the EEA’s, and Malta is second. Eurostat’s annual 2023 series ranks Malta third because it gives Romania 47.4%, higher than the 33.9% worst quarter in the EEA chart, which cannot both hold under one method; the series differ in vintage (Eurostat updated 28 April 2026, EEA chart November 2025) and we could not explain the difference. Ranking Malta second is therefore right on the indicator the Council names (seasonal) and on the four-year average, not on the 2023 annual value.

4

Water bodies: status counts

Malta reported 19 surface water bodies (9 coastal, 5 transitional, 3 river, 2 lake) plus its territorial sea, and 15 groundwater bodies [4]. Territorial waters carry only a chemical status, which is ‘Unknown’ in the data.

Council figure	What the data give	Result
58% of surface water bodies good or high ecological status (by number)	11 of 19: coastal 8 of 9, transitional 3 of 5, river 0 of 3, lake 0 of 2. Assessed 2017–2022.	58%, reproduced
45% good chemical status	9 of 20 including the territorial sea (status ‘Unknown’); 9 of 19 without it (47%). The 9 are the coastal bodies; all 10 river, lake and transitional bodies fail.	45%, reproduced with 20
82% of groundwater bodies (by area) failed quantitative status	292.5 of 356.9 km ² (Malta, Marfa, Pwales and Gozo bodies). By number 4 of 15 (27%). Assessed 2021.	82%, reproduced
100% failed chemical status	15 of 15 bodies, all poor.	100%, reproduced



EEA WISE, Malta's WFD reporting of 2022 (19 surface water bodies, 15 groundwater bodies). Surface area excludes the 3 rivers (3.4 km in all) and territorial waters.

Figure 2. The same bodies counted by number and by area [4]. Surface area excludes the three rivers (3.4 km in all) and the territorial sea.

The groundwater picture is corroborated by the Energy and Water Agency’s monitoring: 21 of 35 boreholes show a significant negative water-level trend over 2000–2021 in its Table 1 (the text says 62.9%, or 22) [5]. The EEA data show the chemical-status variant that excludes ubiquitous persistent substances is identical to the headline for every Maltese surface body, so that exclusion does not explain the failures [4].

5 Where the evidence points different ways

Q1 Is ‘severe water scarcity’ right?

YES AT THE PEAK, NOT ANNUALLY

EVIDENCE FOR THE CLAIM’S IMPRESSION

The seasonal peak of 66.7% is far above Eurostat’s 40% line for severe scarcity, and only Cyprus and Malta are above it [2, 3].

EVIDENCE AGAINST

Eurostat’s annual 2023 value for Malta is 30.1%, in the 20–40% band of ‘scarcity’, and Eurostat warns annual values can mask seasonal stress [3].

WHY THEY DIFFER, AND WHAT IT MEANS HERE

For this claim: the Council says ‘seasonal’ and the severe label fits that figure; it does not describe Malta’s annual average.

Q2 Is surface water quality ‘poor’?

DEPENDS ON THE COUNT

EVIDENCE FOR THE CLAIM’S IMPRESSION

By number only 58% reach good or high ecological status and 45% good chemical status, so almost half the bodies fall short.

EVIDENCE AGAINST

By area 97% of surface water is at good or high ecological status, because nine coastal bodies hold 99.96% of it; the failing bodies are ten small lagoons, salt pans, lakes and wadis.

WHY THEY DIFFER, AND WHAT IT MEANS HERE

For this claim: the Council states ‘by number’ for the ecological figure, so it is accurate; the 45% basis is not stated.

6 Testing the claim

Sub-claim	What the evidence shows	Rating
A. Seasonal WEI+ reached 66.7% in Q3 2023, indicating severe water scarcity	Exact match to the EEA chart [2]; above Eurostat’s 40% severe line [3]. An annual figure would be 30.1%.	SUPPORTED
B. That is the second-highest among EU Member States	Second after Cyprus on the EEA chart and the four-year average; third on Eurostat’s annual 2023 value (Romania higher).	LARGELY SUPPORTED
C. 58% of surface water bodies (by number) at good or high ecological status	11 of 19 [4]; 97% by area.	SUPPORTED
D. 45% of surface water bodies at good chemical status	9 of 20 [4]; needs the territorial sea in the denominator; 47% without. Basis not stated.	LARGELY SUPPORTED
E. 82% of groundwater bodies (by area) failed quantitative status	81.96% by area [4]; 27% by number. Corroborated by borehole trends [5].	SUPPORTED
F. 100% of groundwater bodies failed chemical status	15 of 15 [4].	SUPPORTED

7 Verdict and requests for evidence

VERDICT

LARGELY SUPPORTED

Every figure reproduces from EEA and Eurostat data; the ranking and the 45% depend on the dataset and the denominator. Confidence: high. No right of reply needed.

Why. (1) Five of the six figures reproduce exactly and the sixth (45%) reproduces with a defensible denominator. (2) The caveats are minor: the ranking depends on the series, and ‘by number’ gives a harsher picture of surface waters than area does, as the Council’s own wording signals. Our scale calls that *Largely supported*.

What this verdict does not say. It does not say Malta’s water is well managed or that the status classes are the right yardstick; it says the Council’s numbers match the official data.

Evidence we are asking for

- ☐ From the Energy and Water Agency or ERA: the Third RBMP’s status tables, to confirm the counts and the basis of the 45%.
- ☐ From the EEA and Eurostat: why Romania’s 2023 annual WEI+ (47.4%) exceeds its worst-quarter value in the EEA chart (33.9%).
- ☐ From the Council: the adopted text of the Recommendation and the document in which the WEI+ sentence first appears.

8 Limitations

- We did not read the Third RBMP (era.org.mt returned 403), the Commission’s 2026 country report or the adopted Recommendation. The WISE data are Malta’s 2022 reporting; the plan is dated March 2024 and could differ.
- Status classes use the WISE legends (codes read from the services’ own legend); the Water Framework Directive was not re-read.
- The EEA chart was read from the page’s embedded data; we have no independent copy of its underlying dataset.
- The EWA borehole table has 35 rows; its text reports one more negative trend than the rows show. We cite both.
- Only the two WEI+ series and one plan year were tested; later 2024–2026 values were not available.

References

- [1] Council of the European Union (3 Jul 2026). Draft Council Recommendation on Malta’s economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies, 11130/26, recital (30). (Read in full; draft.) <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11130-2026-INIT/en/pdf>
- [2] European Environment Agency. Worst seasonal water scarcity conditions for European countries in 2023, measured by WEI+ (indicator page, modified 28 Nov 2025; chart data read 15 Oct 2026). <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/use-of-fresh-water-resources-in-europe-1/worst-seasonal-water-scarcity-conditions>
- [3] Eurostat. Water exploitation index, plus (WEI+), sdg_06_60, and reference metadata (updated 28 Apr 2026; retrieved 15 Oct 2026). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/sdg_06_60_esmsip2.htm
- [4] European Environment Agency. WISE Water Framework Directive database, Malta, 2022 reporting (surface and groundwater bodies); queried 15 Oct 2026. https://water.discomap.eea.europa.eu/arcgis/rest/services/WISE_WFD/
- [5] Energy and Water Agency (May 2024). Technical Document in support of the 3rd RBMP: Monitoring Results for the Groundwater Quantitative Status Assessment, Table 1. https://energywateragency.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Technical-Document-Status-of-the-Quantitative-monitoring-network_Final.pdf
- [6] Hartfiel L., Soupir M., Kanwar R. (2020). Malta’s Water Scarcity Challenges: Past, Present, and Future Mitigation Strategies for Sustainable Water Supplies. *Sustainability* 12(23). doi:10.3390/su12239835 (Crossref-verified; abstract read.) <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12239835>
- [7] Casadei S., Peppoloni F., Pierleoni A. (2020). A New Approach to Calculate the Water Exploitation Index (WEI+). *Water* 12(11). doi:10.3390/w12113227 (Crossref-verified; abstract read.) <https://doi.org/10.3390/w12113227>
- [8] Miżien. Data and calculations: data/cc-118/; tools/cc-118-report/.

Appendix A: series standards and verdict scale

Every investigation in this series follows the same rules so that verdicts are comparable and challengeable.

Verdict	Meaning
SUPPORTED	Evidence consistently backs the claim as stated.
LARGELY SUPPORTED	Backed by the evidence, with minor caveats that do not change the substance.
NOT SUBSTANTIATED	Stated more strongly than the evidence offered or available allows. May be true in some conditions but has not been shown.
MISLEADING	Omits material facts so that the overall impression is inaccurate, even if individual statements are defensible.
CONTRADICTED	The available evidence points against the claim.

Confidence

High: multiple independent lines of evidence agree. **Moderate:** evidence is relevant but incomplete or indirect. **Low:** evidence is thin, second-hand or conflicting.

Evidence grades

A experiment · B observational study with a control or gradient · C review, guidance or official statistics · D assertion or anecdote. ♦ marks a source known only second-hand.

Standards

- **Quote the speaker, not the headline**, with outlet and date, and link the original where possible.
- **Separate the claim from the evidence offered for it**, and say who made which statement.
- **Grade the evidence** and show differing views side by side where the evidence is unsettled.
- **State what we could not access or verify**, and what would change the verdict either way.
- **Ask for the missing evidence** in specific, answerable requests.
- **Offer a right of reply** where a check finds a claim Not substantiated, Misleading or Contradicted (or a pledge Not measurable, Off track or Missed), before wider circulation, and append responses.
- **Correct errors openly** with a version number and change log.
- **Whistle-blow only on evidence:** a verdict of *Misleading* or *Contradicted* requires documents or data that can be shown, not inference.
- **Check every side.** Government, opposition, NGOs and developers are held to the same standard.

Appendix B: revision log

Version	Date	Change
1.0	15 Oct 2026	First issue. Verdict Largely supported. No right of reply needed.