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The European project WATERSENS launched in Santander to deliver decentralised, sustainable water management solutions

An international consortium of 16 partners, coordinated by the University of Cantabria, has officially commenced the four-year WATERSENS project. Supported by the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, the €5.28 million initiative seeks to address challenges such as droughts, floods, and emerging pollutants with innovative technologies for water reuse and decentralised water management.

Professor Jan Christensen of the University of Copenhagen, speaking at this week's launch event at the School of Civil, Canal, and Port Engineering, emphasised:

“Every day, thousands of compounds from pharmaceuticals, tyres, or everyday products end up in water. Our role is to measure them and verify whether new technologies truly remove them so water can be reused safely.”

Under the leadership of the University of Cantabria, through its GITECO group, and involving the Environmental Engineering (GIA) group and the Engineering Graphic Expression and CAD (EGI-CAD) unit, the project aims to promote the adoption of Decentralised Water Management (DWM) systems to meet climate-related challenges. These include harnessing both rainwater and treated water in urban and rural settings in ways that minimise environmental cost.

Over the next four years, until August 2029, WATERSENS will test green, circular solutions through six real-life demonstration sites. Innovations will range from floating wetlands for stormwater treatment to biofilters for river regeneration, green walls reusing greywater, vegetated rooftops, and urban cisterns to collect rainwater. All technologies are intended to complement or, in some instances, challenge existing centralised systems.

A digital decision-support platform incorporating artificial intelligence, technology catalogues, climate modelling and modelling tools will be developed to help authorities and local water managers choose the optimal solutions for their specific contexts. As Professor Suzanne Charlesworth from the University of Coventry noted:

“Nature-based systems—wetlands or vegetated features—can remove pollutants that conventional treatment plants don't address, while also boosting biodiversity and capturing carbon.”

Demonstrations will occur in diverse scenarios: in Spanish and Mediterranean regions; in Portugal, Greece, and in South African communities. WATERSENS aims to provide practical tools for municipalities and operators to move toward water-resilient, decentralised systems that are less dependent on large infrastructure and better adapted to climate change.

The partnership includes universities, research centres, water sector companies, and social organisations: alongside the University of Cantabria, the consortium comprises Universidad Rey Juan Carlos; Instituto Tecnológico de Galicia; FCC Aqualia; Asociación RIA; Three O'Clock (France); Klink (Italy); University of Pisa; Autorità di Bacino Distrettuale (Italy); Acque SPA; University of Copenhagen; National Technical University of Athens; Instituto Superior Técnico of Lisbon; Imperial College London; University of Coventry; and University of Cape Town.

For more updates, follow us on LinkedIn @WATERSENSproject.

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