

# Lake Saimaa at risk as EU debates over water protection legislation

*Lake Saimaa, Europe's fourth largest lake, is under growing threat when the European Union is considering opening the Water Framework Directive for review.*

HELSINKI, FINLAND, April 26, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- This review comes amid increasing pressure from international mining companies seeking to loosen pollution limits into Europe's waterways in the name of the [Critical Raw Materials Act](#) and strategic autonomy. Weakening the [Water Framework Directive](#) would put some of Europe's most valuable freshwater ecosystems at risk.



A summer evening view over Lake Saimaa.

[Lake Saimaa](#) is a globally unique freshwater system spanning 4,400 km<sup>2</sup>, with more than 13,000 islands and labyrinthine waterways that support exceptional biodiversity. It is home to endemic species such as the critically endangered Saimaa ringed seal (around 450 individuals remain), as well as unique salmon and Arctic char populations. The area is part of the UNESCO Global Geopark network and a cornerstone of Finnish cultural heritage.

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Lake Saimaa is not only a national treasure. It is a global ecological asset.”  
*Miisa Mink, founder and chair of Saimaa without mines NGO*

The economic value of Saimaa's clean water is immense. Based on regional estimates, the value of shoreline properties alone is approximately €24 billion, not including tourism revenues, fisheries, ecosystem services, and the

profound cultural value of the region's 80,000 cottages and traditional lake-based way of life.

Yet several mining projects pose a direct threat to this irreplaceable ecosystem.

Terrafame's planned expansion in Sotkamo would generate an estimated 1.5 billion tonnes of mining waste over 30 years, containing heavy metals, sulfur compounds, and acidic runoff. The

waste is located dangerously close to water systems connected to the Vuoksi River Basin, of which Saimaa is a central part. A single leakage or tailings dam failure could contaminate Saimaa's waters for decades or longer.

Additional threats include the planned FinnCobalt nickel-cobalt mine in Outokumpu and Grafintec's graphite project in Heinävesi, both located in hydrologically sensitive areas connected to Lake Saimaa. Even legally permitted discharges of sulfates and heavy metals accumulate over time. Combined with Finland's wet climate and porous bedrock, this increases the risk of groundwater contamination and long-term, potentially irreversible damage. Once pollutants enter the watershed, the damage may be effectively irreversible.

At a time when Europe is debating whether to weaken its water protection framework, Lake Saimaa stands as a stark reminder of what is at stake. Europe's raw material challenge cannot be solved by sacrificing its clean waters.

Instead of lowering standards, the EU and Finland must strengthen legal protections for critical freshwater ecosystems, enforce stricter waste management requirements, and ensure independent monitoring and full transparency in environmental impact assessments.

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Swimmers jump from a rock into the waters of Lake Saimaa.



A calm lake view on a summer day at Lake Saimaa.

Lake Saimaa can be polluted only once.

Miisa Mink

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