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“Water management in the agri-food industry: an overview”

The agri-food industry, like other economic sectors, is facing a big challenge nowadays. It is aiming for stimulating the development of industrial environments while accomplishing the environmental objectives of modern society. The risk of water shortage is currently one of the major concerns worldwide. Consequently, taking actions to ensure the water availability and its further management and sanity in any region of the world is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by United Nations Society. In addition, the availability of freshwater is probably the main limiting factor for the global food production. In the case of Spain, due to its singular climatic conditions (dry and warm summers, scarcity of rainfalls throughout the year and seasonal drought) and the high water demand in some regions of the country, this challenge becomes a priority, both in water-use efficiency and preservation of the amount and quality of the existent water resources. For these reasons, Spain is a recognized leader in the use of reclaimed water. Nevertheless, an increased and more generalized use of this resource by the industrial sector will give a boost to the implementation of measures included in the National Circular Economy Plan of Spain. This strategic plan made a priority of improving the water-use efficiency by 10% in order to reduce water demand. The current outlook of reclaimed water in the Spanish food industry is an excellent example of this. Reclaimed water is barely developed in this sector due to the high requirements and restrictions imposed on its use. The 2020 Circular Economy Action Plan of the European Union highlights the key role of the new Regulation (Regulation EU 2020/741 on minimum requirements for water reuse) to encourage a more circular approach to the water reuse and recycling in agriculture and its water efficiency, including industrial processes. In conclusion, food industry should continue to work to decrease water consumption through optimization of its processes and maximizing water re-use, provided that the regenerated waters do not affect to the quality and safety of food. Moreover, the sector should improve the quality of wastewater discharges in such a way as to ensure the effluents does not affect negatively sustainability of natural water resources.