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Viet Nam targets nutrient pollution with new FAO-backed water restoration project

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Viet Nam's new water strategy starts long before rivers reach the sea

Viet Nam and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) have launched a four-year initiative to tackle deteriorating water quality in the Gulf of Tonkin, marking a significant step towards integrated river basin management and pollution control in one of the country's most economically and ecologically important coastal regions.

Funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the Department of Water Resources Management under the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment in partnership with FAO, the project seeks to reverse dissolved oxygen depletion—a growing environmental challenge linked to nutrient pollution from agriculture, aquaculture and untreated domestic wastewater.

Rather than focusing solely on cleaning polluted rivers and coastal waters, the programme aims to prevent contamination upstream by strengthening governance, improving water resource management and enhancing compliance with environmental regulations. The project will develop an integrated database combining environmental, hydrological and socio-economic information to support evidence-based policymaking and resource management. It will also introduce pollution transport models to trace how nutrients move from inland river systems into coastal waters, helping authorities identify pollution hotspots and design more targeted interventions.

The initiative aligns with the objectives of Viet Nam's 2023 Law on Water Resources, which promotes integrated water governance and sustainable watershed management. Beyond scientific monitoring, the programme will support institutional reforms, strengthen regulatory frameworks and develop financing mechanisms to improve long-term water governance. Pilot projects will be implemented alongside capacity-building programmes, public awareness campaigns and community

engagement initiatives, with gender inclusion integrated across all project activities.

The project will be rolled out across seven provinces and centrally governed cities within the Red River Basin—Hanoi, Hai Phong, Hung Yen, Phu Tho, Bac Ninh, Ninh Binh and Quang Ninh—regions that play a critical role in Viet Nam's agricultural production, aquaculture and industrial development. According to Chau Tran Vinh, Director General of the Department of Water Resources Management, the agreement marks a transition from identifying environmental challenges to implementing practical solutions.

Nutrient pollution generated by agriculture, aquaculture and municipal wastewater has become one of the principal drivers of oxygen depletion in estuarine and coastal ecosystems, threatening fisheries, biodiversity and long-term water security. By integrating scientific research, institutional reform and cross-sector collaboration, the project aims not only to restore water quality in the Gulf of Tonkin but also to generate evidence that can inform future environmental policy and sustainable water management across Viet Nam. For FAO, the partnership reflects a broader commitment to supporting climate-resilient agriculture and sustainable natural resource management in countries facing growing pressure from pollution, urbanisation and climate change.