



EPA OPENING STATEMENT

Prepared for

OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE

ON

AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND THE MARINE

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EPA Delegation

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Introduction

The Environmental Protection Agency's mission is to protect and improve the environment as a valuable asset for the people of Ireland and to protect against the harmful effects of radiation and pollution. The EPA has a wide range of responsibilities as environmental regulator, knowledge provider and advocate. Specifically related to water quality, the EPA's responsibilities include:

- coordinating and implementing the national monitoring programme to assess and report on water quality.
- assessing the impact of human activities and pressures on the status of water.
- providing advice and assisting in the establishment of environmental objectives, programmes of measures and river basin management plans.

The Nitrates Directive is implemented in Ireland via the Good Agricultural Practice Regulations. Under these Regulations, the EPA's statutory functions relate to reporting to the European Commission on water quality in the context of the implementation of the Directive. We provide the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's (DAFM) with an annual and independent assessment of water quality in Ireland as part of their annual 'derogation report'. Every four years, the EPA compiles an assessment on the implementation of the Nitrates Directive. The EPA is a member of the Nitrates Expert Committee, which is co-chaired by representatives of DAFM and Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), where our role is to provide the evidence base in relation to water quality.

Water Quality in Ireland

Water quality in Ireland is not as good as it should be. Our rivers, lakes, estuaries and groundwaters continue to be under pressure from human activities. Just over half of surface waters are in a satisfactory condition which means that a large number are not in good ecological health. An overarching message in the EPA's State of the Environment Report, published at the end of 2020, is that the water environment needs to be improved and water pollution must be tackled locally at a water catchment level.

The evidence shows that agriculture is the most significant pressure on water quality. The most widespread problem is excess nutrients from animals and fertilisers which have resulted in elevated levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in our waters.

Nutrient levels impact the ability of these waters to sustain healthy ecosystems and cause nuisance algal blooms. In terms of drinking water, high nitrogen levels, above the drinking water standard, can pose a risk to human health.

In particular, nitrogen pollution is causing a pressure in parts of the south, southeast and east of the country. A combination of freely draining soils combined with relatively intensive farming means the risk of nitrate leaching is high. Rivers such as the Bandon, Lee, Blackwater, Suir, Nore, Barrow and Slaney have high nitrogen levels with significant implications for the marine environments they flow into.

In terms of other agriculture impacts, pollution from phosphorus runoff is causing a pressure around the country on land where the soils are poorly draining. There are also problems arising from excess sediment from runoff and stream bank erosion, drainage impacting on physical habitat conditions, and pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals in waters. Overall, the message is that protecting water quality is an issue for all farmers, not just those that have the largest or more intensive farms.

Nitrates Action Programme

The Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) is an important implementation mechanism to deliver improvements in water quality and meet our Water Framework Directive objectives. However, the evidence shows that the 4th NAP has not protected water quality from nutrient pollution from agriculture. In relation to the 5th NAP, the EPA supports the range and breadth of proposed measures which if implemented, as proposed, will strengthen the protection of the environment.

A one size fits all approach will not be adequate to achieve the outcomes that we need and therefore measures must be targeted to achieve water quality objectives. They need to be targeted and specific to the soils, activities and risks on the farm. The EPA has developed maps, called Pollution Impact Potential Maps, that show the highest risk areas for losing phosphorus and nitrogen in the landscape. We have also recently published an assessment of the amount of nitrogen reduction needed in the key catchments of concern along the

south and southeast. These tools can help policymakers, farmers and their advisors to target actions to reduce nutrient losses from farms.

Measures in the NAP must be consistent and aligned across agricultural and other environmental policy to achieve multiple environmental benefits. The EPA welcomes the acknowledgement in the consultation document that better cross-policy integration is needed. We welcome also the inclusion of measures for ammonia losses and greenhouse gas emissions as a means of joining up policy.

It is clear from the consultation to date that there are issues with achieving compliance with the Good Agricultural Practice Regulations. Securing compliance with all existing and new regulations needs to be given priority using the full suite of tools from support and advice, incentives and a strengthened enforcement and inspection regime.

Summary

Agriculture is the most significant pressure impacting on water quality and trends are going in the wrong direction. A reduction in nutrient emissions to water is essential to achieve improvements in water quality and protect our coastal waters.

The 5th Nitrates Action Programme is an opportunity to reduce pollution from nutrients which will also bring multiple benefits for health, climate, air quality and biodiversity. Targeted, consistent and substantial measures are needed as a matter of urgency using the full suite of tools from advice, incentives and a strengthened enforcement and inspection regime to support compliance.

The EPA is committed to working constructively and collaboratively with relevant Government Departments and Agencies to provide the evidence base for assessing water quality and the wider environment as well as assisting in developing plans and programmes that will protect and restore Ireland's natural environment.

Supporting material

- Ireland's Environment: An Integrated Assessment 2020 [State of the Environment | Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- Water Quality in Ireland 2013-2018 [Water Quality in Ireland Report 2013-2018](#)
- Water Quality in 2020: An Indicator's Report [Water Quality in 2020 Report](#)
- Catchment Nitrogen Reductions Assessment [Catchments Nitrogen Reduction Assessment Report](#)