

**PRESENTATION TO THE COMMITTEE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD
AND THE MARINE**

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BY

SAVE OUR SHANNON ORGANISATION (SOSO)

www.saveourshannonorganisation.ie

Flooding in the Shannon, particularly in Winter, has been a constant feature of life for the residents of the Callows for centuries. However, the extent of the flooding and the damage caused has increased in the past 50 years. Flooding occurrence all along the Shannon affects various communities in many diverse ways and is a constant worry and cause of anxiety (Summer and Winter) for those who live and work both sides of the Shannon Callows between Athlone and Meelick Weir, Co Galway).

We will address the flooding under two headings:

Winter flooding and Summer flooding

1 WINTER FLOODING occurs every year and residents have come to accept this. The rain of late Autumn and Winter cause the water in the River Shannon to rise above the banks and spill over thousands of acres of land and stay there for two, three or even four months of the year.

It may fall back after that time but flooding will render the land useless for grazing from October to March each year. In the Summer when the flood waters recede and the land dries, the fields can be grazed and the grass cut for hay, silage/haylage. Problems occur for residents when the floods are huge and come into farm yards, buildings and homes.

A hundred years ago people lived, worked and farmed on the land but constant floods drove them from their homes. The big flood of 1954 caused by a huge snowfall that melted quickly, drove the last residents of the Shannon banks out. The Government at that time built houses for them in upland areas and now there are no houses in the flood plains of the Callows.

However, the flood of 1954 has been surpassed twice, in November 2009 and January 2016 and matched once in Feb 2020. In the past 15 years houses and farms that were never flooded before have been affected. These houses were not built in a flood area but the flood waters are now so high that they are reaching them. The causes are many and the main ones are as follows:

- a) Bord na Mona has deposited millions of tons of silt into the river, lessening the depth and causing the flood waters to rise quicker and spread further.
- b) No proper maintenance programme has been put in place by any government since Ireland was in British hands. The river has now overgrown banks, collapsing banks, silt islands and vegetation growing in the middle of the river which prevents the water from flowing freely.
- c) The water levels in the river are controlled by sluices/gates and weirs all of which are controlled by the ESB and Waterways Ireland. The lack of co-ordination in controlling flood water by these bodies has contributed considerably to flooding when these gates, sluices and weirs are not opened in time or not opened fully (despite repeated warnings of heavy rain by Met Eireann and requests from the local community).
- d) There is no single Government agency in charge of the Shannon. At present we have the OPW as lead agency of the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group. Twenty State agencies, from the ESB, Waterways Ireland and inland fisheries to the local authorities, are involved in management along the River Shannon. Each of those agencies has responsibility for protecting its own prospects. Unbelievably, no victims of flooding are part of this Working Group.

The flood of 2009 was supposed to be a “once in a century flood”. Sadly this has not proven to be the case and every year, and particularly this year, the residents wonder if the 2016 flood will be surpassed. What problems will arise then? Will more houses be flooded, roads and bridges swept away? Will cracks appear in the structure of the main bridges? Constant worry and anxiety are what we live with.

2 SUMMER FLOODING used to occur every now and then prior to the mid-1990s. However, these floods are more prevalent now, especially since Waterways Ireland became an all-Ireland body. These Summer floods are causing harm to the livelihood of farmers, business people, boat hire companies, fishermen and people in the tourist industry. Inestimable harm has been done to the biodiversity of the Callows. The Corncrake is now gone. The Curlew and all wader birds, swans and wildlife are under enormous threat. Their habitats have been destroyed by water flooding the grass, the hedgerows, the drains and the woodland – their homes. Constant Summer flooding has prevented farmers from grazing land and saving hay/haylage. This year the Summer flood came in early July and has remained since. No fodder has been saved this year in the longest summer flood ever.

When the flood began to rise in early July, Waterways Ireland and the ESB were asked by residents, TDs and Co Councillors to open all the gates/sluices in Meelick and Lusmagh (30 in total) but for more than 10 days they failed to do so. This meant that grass was covered by more than two feet of water which could not get away even when all the gates/sluices were eventually opened. It is still there and the grass is now rotten. Farmers need to be helped by funds to buy alternative fodder, businesses/contractors need to be funded for lack of earnings and the wildlife need to be protected from harm.

Our organisation emerged from the coming together of various groups of people affected by flooding in 2009 and 2016 – in Lusmagh, Banagher, Clonfert, Shannon Harbour, Shannon bridge, Clonmacnoise, Moore, Clonascra, Clonown, Carrickobrien, and Golden Island Athlone. In the Spring of 2016 we formed the Mid-Shannon Flood Relief Group and changed our name in 2020 to the Save Our Shannon Organisation (SOSO). We have brought our case to the attention of all TDs in our area, to the leaders of the three Government parties and so far no relief plan has been put in place. We are now putting our case to you.

Kind regards.

Emily Young
(Hon Sec on behalf of Save Our Shannon Organisation).
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