



**Opening Statement by Macra na Feirme President Elaine Houlihan
to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine**

Wednesday 14th Feb 2024

Chairman and Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address you here today. My name is Elaine Houlihan, President of Macra na Feirme. Macra na Feirme welcome the opportunity to present on Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme from a young farmer perspective. Young farmer participation, along with other relevant actors, is key to assuring the successful design of the agri-environment legislation in achieving its goals including delivering on water quality. We are the generation that will implement measures over the short, but also long-term, giving measures longevity and permanence. Moreover, the importance of the Nitrates Derogation for young farmers is an issue that needs careful consideration in the context of Generational Renewal within the farming sector but also with respect to the development and sustainability of rural Ireland. Therefore, young farmers need to be given a voice, and consulted during the review, development and implementation stages of policy at EU, national and regional levels. It is critical that we continue to review and assess the effectiveness of policy but also that we recognise the need of policy to provide certainty for farm businesses and that policy recognises the timeframes for water quality measures to deliver improvements in water and ecological quality.

Young farmers are motivated to implement measures related to the improvement of water quality and, as such, given their age profile, are the generation that can provide a legacy to the behavioural change that is being asked of farmers in terms of changing farming practices to consider water quality and its improvement and protection. However, the investment of young farmers, and all farmers collectively, in water quality improvement and protection needs to be fully acknowledged for the ecosystem service it provides. All of society needs to appreciate and value the ecosystem service

component of farming with respect to water quality. To truly acknowledge the added value of farmers' actions in their farm business, the costs of their actions which benefit all of society should be shared with consumers. This would provide a positive outcome for farm income and livelihoods and present opportunity for farm diversification and support Generational Renewal while also ensuring water quality and the sustainability of our environment.

Young farmers are seeking an enabling policy framework to ensure not only sustainable water quality but also a viable agricultural sector for generations to come. To achieve this, it needs to be recognised that water quality goes beyond the sole farm environment, involving neighbouring business, industries, communities and local authorities. It must be recognised, for young farmers, improving water quality, in line with the EU Nitrates directive, requires capital investment, e.g. slurry storage, compounding the issues faced by young farmers in access to finance. While public schemes such as the CAP offer options for support, there can often be critical time lags and commonly such supports remain insufficient to cover investments costs against rising inflation and start-up cost of farm businesses.

There needs to be greater communication and clarity for farmers on the targets of nitrates directive, and what it is aiming to achieve. This is not a stand-alone document and the fundamental connections between EU policies on various aspects of water related issues (e.g. Urban Waste Water Management) need greater communication to the farming community. In addition, there is need for greater communication on how water management policy crosslinks with nature protection and conservation and the implications at farm scale, and especially in terms of nitrates derogation. Moreover, and in particular, the role of the Nitrates Directive in supporting the delivery of the water framework directive (Directive 2000/60/EC, WFD) which provides an overarching framework for water management merits greater attention and communication.

This complexity and detail of the policy framework itself highlights the complexity of the issues facing water management, and that farmers are not the sole actors contributing to its impairment. There are other actors and sources of pollution which also need equality scrutiny if we are to achieve the targets of water management policy. There must be fairness in the distribution of responsibility for the delivery of water quality, with an understand that farmers are playing their part and will continue to do so.

To conclude, good communication is key to achieving the aims of the Nitrates Directive. There needs to be improved communication on key water quality targets, so that people can clearly understand and put in place actions to support water quality management in both the short and long term on their farms. There also needs to be greater coherency among water quality targets and their wording in the legislation, and for this to be communicated to farmers and society. We can only effect change together, and there needs greater emphasis on supporting awareness of what good water quality practices are rather than greater emphasis on enforcement which neglects the importance of education and awareness in behavioural change for long term and sustained water quality improvement and protection.