



**Opening Statement prepared for Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action regarding
Recommendations contained in Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss relating to Land
Use and Water Quality**

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Introduction

Thank you Chairman, and thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee to contribute to your discussions on the Recommendations relating to land use and water quality from the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.

Agriculture and forestry are Ireland's dominant land use, responsible for shaping approximately two thirds of our total land area. In addition, as an island nation, Ireland also has a relatively large marine area. The way in which we manage our land and seas has a significant impact on how we support biodiversity and how we address the significant loss of biodiversity seen over recent decades.

Our Department, alongside our farmers, fishers and foresters, are committed to action to address these losses. As such, our Department welcomes the work of the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss as an additional resource to support expansion of our tool box of actions.

Recommendations

Of 33 actions specifically identified in the Recommendations as being the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 11 are considered implemented and a further 17 in progress. Those not being implemented are considered to fall under the remit of other departments or agencies, or are being delivered in a different approach. The Department are delivering the recommendations of the Assembly through a range of programmes. For example, Recommendation 79 calls for increased access to agri-environmental schemes and payments-on-results schemes to be

available to all farmers with commensurate funding. Within the CAP Strategic Plan, the Department are supporting farmers in this ambition through the introduction of eco-schemes, which over 90% of farmers are voluntarily availing of, continuation of support for the European innovation Partnerships (EIPs), driving innovation at local level, including the flagship €30 million Breeding Waders EIP which will be co-supported with our colleagues in National Parks and Wildlife Service, and the national agri-environmental scheme, ACRES, with a results based approach to delivery. Such was the interest in the first tranche of the ACRES programme, with over 46,000 applicants being accepted, the stream checker for the second Tranche of ACRES is now open thereby allowing 50,000 farmers to participate in the flagship environmental programme under Ireland's 2023-2027 CAP plan, with unprecedented €1.5 billion funding. Our Department have committed to increasing organic farmed land area to 330,000ha from 110,000 ha by 2027. This trebling of the organic area will be achieved through the Organic Farming Scheme, enhanced advisory support and increased promotion as well as developing market demand. A total budget of €256 million has been allocated to the Scheme over the lifetime of the CAP Strategic Plan.

Outside of CAP, our Department is working closely with colleagues in other Government Departments including, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the objectives of national strategies and plans beneficial for biodiversity. Such initiatives include the National Biodiversity Action Plan, the 4th iteration of which is due for publication shortly, and a number of EU LIFE funded projects including Wild Atlantic Nature and Waters of LIFE Integrated Projects both of which have elements of results-based agri environmental approaches within their project design.

In terms of water quality and biodiversity, this is also a significant focus for our Department. The Department provides financial support to the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) since 2019. ASSAP advisors work across Ireland collaborating with catchment scientists from Local Authorities Waters Programme to provide farmers with confidential advice

focused on preventing nutrient losses to water. In recognition of this priority this Department, in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, have committed €60 million in funding to support a new Water EIP project. This new EIP will follow the typical EIP approach of ground up development, locally -led with significant stakeholder collaboration to promote the adoption of innovative best practice in nutrient management and address a critical gap in measures to protect and restore water quality. This EIP will build on the positive work of ASSAP, expecting to target 15,000 farmers in priority areas nationally.

In regard to recommendations for the marine environment, Ireland's goals for sustainable fisheries are supported through the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. This policy provides the framework for the long-term conservation and sustainability of fishing, economically, socially and environmentally, in waters around Ireland and throughout EU waters. Following this framework and the principles of sustainability it is possible for Marine Protected Areas and fisheries to co-exist, ensuring protection for biodiversity and allowing sea fisheries to continue to support coastal communities and food security.

Concerning the forestry sector, the vision for the forest sector to 2030 has been refined in recent years. In 2022, a Shared National Vision for Trees, Woods and Forests in Ireland was published. This Vision informed the Forest Strategy which extends to 2030. The recently approved Forestry Programme (2023-2027) aims to ensure *The right tree in the right place for the right reason with the right management supporting a sustainable and thriving economy, society and healthy environment*. This is a €1.3 billion programme which has a greater focus on delivering environmental, social and recreational benefits for people from new and existing forests.

These policy and legislative instruments are further supported by ongoing training and knowledge transfer for those responsible for delivery of action on the ground. The Department are committed to continuous educational development for farmers, fishers, foresters and their advisors through formal

approaches such as the Green Cert and also informal approaches such as peer – to -peer learning within EIPs.

Conclusion

These are some examples of what the Department is actioning in line with the Citizens' Assembly Recommendations. The Department acknowledges the accumulated negative impacts on biodiversity and climate which our sector has contributed to through lack of or misinformed action, alongside other sectors over past decades. However, we are working to the future, making more informed decisions as the evidence base expands, continuous monitoring and review, and through greater collaboration across Government. From this we are striving, with all our stakeholders, to improve the sustainability performance of the agricultural, forestry and fisheries sector in line with all three pillars of sustainability.

I thank the Committee for the invitation to discuss the Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.