



## ***EPA OPENING STATEMENT***

**Prepared for**

**OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2023**

### **EPA Delegation**

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## **Introduction**

I would like to thank the Committee for inviting the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to discuss the recommendations of the Citizen's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. I am joined by EPA senior management colleagues Mary Gurrie and Dr Jenny Deakin who deal with water quality monitoring and assessment in the EPA.

The EPA's purpose is to protect, improve and restore our environment through regulation, scientific knowledge and working with others. In protecting the environment, the EPA protects nature and biodiversity through managing emissions to air, water, land and radiological protection.

Today we will focus on water quality in Ireland - rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal and groundwaters – upon which resilient and diverse aquatic ecosystems are so dependent. In this regard, EPA's responsibilities include:

- coordinating and implementing the national water quality monitoring programme,
- assessing the impact of human activities and pressures on water,
- providing advice and assisting in the establishment of environmental objectives, programmes of measures and river basin management plans,
- regulation of wastewater, industrial and waste activities, and
- oversight of local authority performance in terms of their statutory environmental functions.

## **Water Quality in Ireland**

The quality of Ireland's surface water resource is under significant pressure from human activities. The EPA's most recent assessments<sup>1,2</sup> show that only just over half (54%) of surface waters - rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters - are in a satisfactory condition which means that a large number are not in good ecological health. The picture for our estuaries is even more stark with only 36% in satisfactory ecological condition. The scale

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<sup>1</sup> Water Quality in Ireland 2016-2021 ([Monitoring & Assessment: Freshwater & Marine Publications | Environmental Protection Agency \(epa.ie\)](#))

<sup>2</sup> Water Quality in 2022: An Indicators Report ([Monitoring & Assessment: Freshwater & Marine Publications | Environmental Protection Agency \(epa.ie\)](#))

of the challenge to bring all waterbodies to good or better ecological health by 2027, as required by the Water Framework Directive is, therefore, significant.

The quality of our waters is being damaged by activities that release pollutants into the water environment and damage the physical integrity of water habitats. The main causes are:

- Run-off of nutrients, sediment and pesticides from agricultural lands and farmyards
- Activities such as land drainage, navigational dredging and the presence of barriers such as dams, weirs or culverts in water courses
- Discharges of poorly treated sewage from urban waste water treatment plants, domestic treatment systems and storm water overflows
- Run-off of nutrients and sediment from forestry operations.

To address these pressures, the EPA highlights three areas for consideration by the Committee which align with some of the recommendations of the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.

### **Compliance**

The EPA agrees with the Citizen's Assembly that there needs to be a greater focus on the implementation and enforcement of biodiversity-related legislation. Our view is that full implementation, and compliance with, all existing environmental legislation is a must for the environment.

The European Commission, through their Environmental Implementation Reviews<sup>3</sup>, has highlighted areas where there is poor implementation of environmental law in Ireland.

This includes a need to complete the Natura 2000 designation process for both terrestrial and marine environments to ensure the legal protection of habitats and species.

Appropriate management plans with targeted actions must be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency in protected areas. An increased focus on the protection of the marine environment and the control of invasive species is important.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022SC0260>

The EPA, as Ireland's environmental regulator and through our oversight role of Local Authorities, will continue to ensure that environmental compliance and enforcement actions are prioritised and implemented. Specifically related to water quality, it is critical that Local Authorities fully implement and enforce the environmental legislation for which they are responsible, including agricultural inspections, septic tank inspections, and trade effluent licensed discharges. Inspections should be targeted in areas where water quality is at risk and where there are known pressures on water quality. Appropriate enforcement action should be taken promptly to resolve any issues.

### **Policy Coherence**

The Assembly recommended more coordinated action and an over-arching strategic approach at a national level to address the biodiversity crisis. The EPA agrees with this finding. Policy coherence and consistency is vital to ensure that environmental policy delivers for the environment, that co-benefits across water, biodiversity, climate and air are maximised and that trade-offs are understood.

The EPA's view is that there is now a significant opportunity to develop an overall integrated National Environmental Policy Position. This will ensure that existing environmental protection measures succeed and do not compete or have unintended consequences. Such a policy position could set out an ambition for protecting Ireland's environment in the short, medium and long-term with the aim of having a clean, healthy environment, that is valued and protected by all. It should be a national vision to which all government departments, agencies, businesses, communities and individuals can sign up to, to play their part in protecting our environment.

Specifically related to water, multiple sectors, stakeholders, government departments and agencies are required to work together to address the pressures on water quality. The next River Basin Management Plan, which is almost two years overdue, is urgently required to provide commitment on the measures required, and clarity on roles and responsibilities and the timeframes for delivery.

## **Targeted Measures**

The EPA encourages the Committee to consider the need for targeted measures to achieve the outcomes we need in water quality and protection of aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity. Targeted measures should be specific to local conditions such as soil types, physical settings and water quality. A one-size-fits-all approach will not deliver the water quality and biodiversity outcomes that we need. The EPA has produced a range of tools and models to support the development of targeted measures, often referred to as ‘the right measure in the right place’. Such measures can also have multiple benefits for other environmental objectives. For example, reducing the use of chemical nitrogen fertiliser can have benefits for greenhouse gas reduction and improvement of air quality, while buffer zones to intercept phosphorus can also have benefits for biodiversity. The EPA recommends that an emphasis on tailored and targeted measures to the particular area that is relevant to the pollutant of concern will deliver the best water quality and biodiversity outcomes.

## **Summary**

As well as being essential for our health and wellbeing, and our economy, clean water is essential for nature and wildlife both for species which live in the aquatic environment and those that depend on it. Many of our national protected areas and habitats depend on good water quality.

The EPA’s role in regulating emissions to air, water, land and radiological protection, and in providing the evidence base on the pressures impacting on the environment, supports the protection of nature and biodiversity. The EPA highlights three areas of focus for the Committee which align with some of the recommendations of the Citizen’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss covering (i) full implementation, and compliance with, existing environmental legislation (ii) policy coherence and (iii) the need for targeted measures.