



Opening Statement for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment & Climate Action, 07/11/23

I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for inviting us to attend to discuss the recommendations contained in the Citizens' Assembly report on Biodiversity Loss and how they relate to Water Quality.

I am joined today by my colleagues, Technical Advisers; Colin Byrne and Marie Archbold and Assistant Principal, Deirdre Dunworth.

We have examined the Citizens' Assembly report on Biodiversity Loss and I welcome the 14 specific recommendations in relation to Freshwater. They align well with the planned actions contained in the new national River Basin Management Plan and indeed, we were mindful of them while finalising the Plan. The Plan was sent to the Water Policy Advisory Committee last week for review. We expect the WPAC to meet before the end of November to discuss it. The Plan will then be presented to Government for approval and subsequently published. The Plan will operate up to and including 2027.

The Water Action Plan is Ireland's third River Basin Management Plan and it outlines the measures the Government and other sectors are taking to improve water quality in Ireland's groundwater, rivers, lakes, estuarine and coastal waters. It provides for the future sustainable management of our water resources as



specified under the UN Sustainable Development Goals No.6 and as mandated by the Water Framework Directive.

The concept to good water quality has significantly changed since the Directive was introduced. The term 'water status' is now used and this relates to the overall condition of aquatic ecosystems. Surface water bodies are classified by their ecological status which includes; biology, chemical water quality and hydromorphology/physical condition, combined. Hazardous chemicals are also monitored for. All of this information is combined to provide an overall status of surface water bodies. Groundwater bodies are similarly classified but assessments relate to chemical status and quantitative status (the amount of water present). The element with the lowest status for any given water body determines the overall classification, and is referred to as the 'one out, all out' principle. So as you can appreciate, assessing natural water bodies is a comprehensive process.

The Water Action Plan enhances and builds upon the work of the first and second cycle plans. The plan addresses the shortcomings experienced during the implementation of previous plans and it strengthens the incorporation of the integrated catchment management approach, including land use.

The Environmental Protection Agency ('EPA') reports that water quality in Ireland has made some improvements but these have been offset by declines in water quality elsewhere. Just over half of surface waters are in satisfactory condition. As pointed out by the Citizens' Assembly report water quality and aquatic



biodiversity go hand in hand. Healthy aquatic ecosystems rely on good supporting water quality and habitat quality.

Meeting the challenge of protecting and improving Ireland's water quality is a complex undertaking. There is a significant challenge in cross-sectoral coordination. Close coordination is needed to identify and exploit any potential opportunity and co-benefits for mitigating and adapting to climate change as well as for biodiversity protection.

Improved technical evidence now provides us with a robust basis for targeting measures at local level.

The Mission Statement of the Water Plan is:

“To take action to protect and improve all of Ireland's waterbodies by implementing the right measure in the right place, at the right time.”

Turning to the specific recommendations in the Citizens' Assembly report on Freshwaters I believe that many of the issues are provided for in the Plan and we are happy to delve into these in more depth during the discussions.

In keeping with the ambition of this plan the Government's objective will be to achieve as close to 100% compliance by 2027 as possible. Reviewing progress will enable mitigation programmes to be assessed, modified and expanded to maximise the ambition for Cycle 3.

While there are a range of environmental pressures impacting natural waters the main environmental pressures continue to be; Agriculture, Physical Impacts from



human activities such as drainage and barriers on rivers, as well as Forestry and Urban Waste Water Discharges.

Considerable efforts have been made in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to strengthen the regulation of the agricultural sector through the Nitrates Action Programme, including increased enforcement efforts. New schemes have been designed under the new CAP Strategic Plan to deliver co-benefits for water, biodiversity and climate going beyond compliance with regulations.

DHLGH will lead in the development of a new national Hydromorphology Programme involving an overhaul of regulatory regimes and the establishment of river barriers mitigation programme operated by Inland Fisheries Ireland.

The Forest Service has committed to assess the 216 waterbodies at risk from Forestry, identifying those forestry activities most likely to be the cause of impact and the measures to address them.

Local authorities, with the support of the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) are developing an implementation strategy for nature based Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems on a national scale.

Uisce Éireann will continue investment in wastewater infrastructure and will review all of 197 Water Bodies where Urban Waste Water discharges have been identified as a significant pressure by 2025.



Finally, LAWPRO has commenced the development of 46 local Catchment Management sub-Plans. These sub-plans will provide details of the locations of measures at catchment level and will serve as a basis for tracking and managing progress in implementation during this cycle and beyond.

As I finish I would just like to reiterate that, the Water Action Plan is being reviewed by the Water Policy Advisory Committee at the moment. It will then be presented to Government for approval and it will be subsequently published.

I thank you for your attention and we will be happy to take any questions from the members and to discuss the Citizens' Assembly recommendations.

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ENDS.