

Opening Statement - Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action

A combination of factors testify to the wider environmental challenges facing Ireland. Climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of habitats and contamination of the fresh water and estuarine waters are all elements of this context. Each is related one to the other but individually they each require determined and focused policy responses and targeted actions.

Healthy freshwater ecosystems are essential for people and nature. Fish populations are a key component of these ecosystems and a barometer of environmental health. They are critical to the many different types of these ecosystems in Ireland, including rivers, lakes, canals and marshes and peatlands. Freshwaters support rich biodiversity and provide ecosystem services to people, such as clean water, amenity value and flood protection and are vital for maintaining a stable climate (riparian zones and wetlands act as a national carbon sink).

Freshwater ecosystems are increasingly under pressure with many fish species under severe pressure and threatened with extinction due to a combination of factors of anthropogenic origin. The decline is intrinsically linked to and exacerbates climate change.

Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) delivers a public service that aligns with national biodiversity protection priorities and policies encompassing the 'mainstreaming' of biodiversity into decision making across all sectors in line with the European Green Deal and Biodiversity Strategy.

Legislation

IFI Functions are set out in Section 7 of the Inland Fisheries Act 2010. IFI is tasked with addressing the management, protection and conservation of the inland fisheries resource (Section 7(1)). This resource encompasses freshwater catchments and coastal/inshore marine habitats.

The Act goes on to address the general functions of the agency as:

- (a) Promote, support, facilitate and advise the Minister on the conservation, protection, management, marketing, development and improvement of inland fisheries including sea angling;
- (b) develop and advise the Minister on policy and national strategies relating to inland fisheries including sea angling; and
- (c) ensure implementation and delivery of policy and strategiesas agreed with the Minister.

The Act specifies a wide range of priorities and actions which IFI is mandated to address as part of its brief.

Declining water quality and the loss of habitats and biodiversity are of particular concern to IFI.

(a) Declining water quality

According to the National Water Forum, Ireland's surface waters and groundwaters continue to be under pressure from human activities. Two-fifths of Ireland's river sites nationally are exhibiting high nitrogen concentrations and the rivers, groundwaters and estuaries in the south east are under particular pressure from excessive nitrogen coming from intensive agricultural activities over freely draining soils in these areas.

Phosphorus concentrations are too high in over a quarter of Ireland's rivers and over one third of lakes and this is impacting on their biological quality. The loads of nitrogen and phosphorus coming from major rivers to Ireland's marine environment have been increasing since 2013 and are putting the water quality of our estuaries and coastal waters under sustained pressure.

Clearly, nutrient levels remain too high in many water bodies and there is no indication that they are decreasing.

(b) Loss of habitats and biodiversity

Dr. Liam Lysaght, Director of the National Biodiversity Data Centre outlines the specific biodiversity problems facing Ireland as follows.

- The conservation status of only about 10% of the approximately 31,000 species known to occur in Ireland, has yet been assessed, indicating a fundamental knowledge gap in how biodiversity is changing in Ireland. Of the species that have been assessed, one in every fifth species is threatened with extinction here.
- The conservation status of one third of our habitats afforded legal protection under the EU Habitats Directive dis-improved between 2007 and 2013.
- Atlantic salmon, European eel and angel shark have suffered catastrophic population declines, and the freshwater pearl mussel, Ireland's longest living animal, is facing extinction.
- The native white-clawed crayfish is threatened with the arrival of the crayfish plague.

With regard to Atlantic Salmon, adult runs have dropped from about 2 million salmon returning to Irish rivers yearly in the 1970s, to about 250,000 currently. Similarly with regard to eel, there has been an even more catastrophic decline. The European eel is now classified as critically endangered in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of threatened species. The number of young eels reaching our waters (from the Sargasso Sea) has declined over the past 30 years and amounts to as little as 8% of what was present during the 1970s.

A further aspect of the loss of biodiversity concerns the threat posed by invasive alien species. A case in point here is *Lagarosiphon major* (curly waterweed) which represents a significant threat in western lakes and the control of which IFI is already allocating a significant resource.

With more than 84,000 kms of river network and 12,000 lakes, all of which are now under pressure or endangered in some way, the task of protecting and enhancing the quality of Irish freshwaters is monumental. The report of the Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (2023), concluded that “the management of our freshwater systems requires immediate action. It requires increased level of ambition, increased resources for Water Framework Directive implementation (and therefore aquatic biodiversity protection and mitigation), a focus on water quality and aquatic biodiversity outcomes, clarity on roles and responsibilities and accountability for achievement of the outcomes” (p.23).

Governance and Organisational Capacity

Given the complexity and multiplicity of challenges faced by IFI in carrying out its statutory remit, the Board’s focus in the coming years must be one of ensuring the necessary organisational capability and resources. In recent times IFI has encountered a degree of turbulence in this regard. In the past 18 months, the Minister felt compelled to stand down the Board on a no fault basis and appoint two Section 18 appointees to perform the functions of IFI. Following on from these events, Ernst & Young were contracted to undertake a governance review of the organisation. This review listed 11 action areas with the following immediate priorities:

- Clear definition and agreement of the strategic remit of Inland Fisheries Ireland
- Realignment of Board & Committee Structures and Membership
- Refresh of Supporting Governance Documents and Provision of Training
- Training and Induction of Board
- Relationship between CEO and Board Chair

The incoming Board has accepted the E & Y report and its recommendations and has now put in place a sub-group who will work with the two former S18 appointees in implementing the E & Y recommendations.

Into the future, and assuming the organisational issues are navigated successfully, it is important that the remit and impact of IFI is extended to address the existential threats confronting many of Ireland’s aquatic habitats. This will include a focus on enhanced research capacity; a socio-economic research and analysis programme to underpin angling and fisheries policy; an increase in protection and conservation capacity; and improvement of the development and promotion functions for the inland fisheries resource. The organisation will also need to build capacity for better environmental inspection and intervention.

Crucially it will be necessary for IFI to build relationships and synergies with cognate bodies who share the broad agenda of environmental protection. These include in particular, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); the National Parks and Wildlife Service; local

authority water inspection and protection personnel; local authority waters programme (LAWPRO); the national biodiversity data centre and any other relevant organisations.

IFI is now about to enter a new strategic planning phase for the period from 2025 onwards. This plan will aim to identify and clarify the corporate priorities of the organisation with reference to its founding Act and to Government and EU policy. It is already apparent that the research capability of IFI will need to be strengthened as to ensure better monitoring and information on the status of the inland fisheries resource; a better understanding of the factors which underpin this status and greater clarity on the options available for protecting and enhancing the resource. This will certainly require staff in addition to the existing Employment Control Framework complement of 320. IFI has already estimated a total future staff complement of 520 is required to deliver on a range of actions which would see IFI take on an enhanced role across its remit and the full scale of related aquatic, environmental, biodiversity and ecological imperatives.

Professor Tom Collins

Chair designate

February 6th 2024