



## ***EPA OPENING STATEMENT***

**Prepared for**

**OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HERITAGE**

**Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2022**

### **EPA Delegation**

Dr Tom Ryan, Director, Office of Environmental Enforcement

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Ms Mary Gurrie, Programme Manager, Office of Evidence and Assessment

Dr Michelle Minihan, Senior Inspector, Office of Environmental Enforcement

## **Introduction**

Firstly, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to assist in your deliberations in relation to water quality and water supply. I am joined by EPA senior management colleagues: Noel Byrne, Mary Gurrie and Michelle Minihan all of whom have various responsibilities for water quality issues within the remit of EPA.

The EPA's remit in this area includes acting as the drinking water quality regulator for public water supplies, the enforcement of waste water authorisations, for coordinating and implementing the national monitoring programme to assess and report on water quality, and for assessing the impact of human activities and pressures on the status of water bodies. In this context, the EPA publishes a series of reports annually including the Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies Report; the Urban Wastewater Treatment Report and the Water Quality in Ireland Report, all of which are due for publication over the next few weeks.

The last time EPA was invited to address this Committee was in October 2021 in the aftermath of two very serious incidents at drinking water treatment plants in Ballymore Eustace and Gorey towards the end of that summer. At that time, EPA highlighted our concerns that the existing arrangements for the delivery of safe drinking water in terms of managerial oversight, operational control and responsiveness were not working satisfactorily and were placing an unacceptable risk to public health by failing to ensure safe and secure drinking water. I will take the opportunity of this opening statement to update the Committee on the current status of drinking water quality with some remarks about water quality generally in Ireland.

## **Drinking Water Quality**

Drinking water is sourced from our rivers, lakes, springs, and groundwater and must be treated to make it clean and safe to drink before it is supplied to people. To this end, the EPA is the drinking water quality regulator, responsible for enforcing the Drinking Water Regulations.

Irish Water is responsible for providing public water services and for ensuring that drinking water quality meets the standard in the Regulations and that it is 'clean and wholesome' for consumption. Irish Water have responsibility under the Regulations for approximately 800 drinking water treatment plants in Ireland, which are, for the most part, operated by Local Authorities under a Service Level Agreement for Irish Water.

The EPA enforces the Drinking Water Quality regulations through an annual programme of audits, assessments and through promotion of our Remedial Action List (RAL). The RAL is a dynamic list of public water supplies that EPA has identified as priorities for significant action and investment by Irish Water to improve plant performance and resilience in supplying drinking water. A supply may be placed on the RAL if it cannot provide drinking water that is free from certain microbiological or chemical substances, or if the treatment plant is not operated effectively and correctly.

It is important to emphasise that compliance with the microbiological and chemical standards for public drinking water supplies remains high at greater than 99.7%, which means the water in our public water supplies is safe to drink. In addition, Irish Water had reduced the number of people served by RAL supplies from just over 1 million to approx. 375,000 at the end of 2021 which was a positive development. Some key achievements by Irish Water in 2021 included the commissioning of a new plant at Vartry (serves approx. 127,000) and an upgrade of Leixlip (serves approx. 590,000) water treatment plants and these supplies were subsequently removed from the RAL.

However, issues at a number of other treatment plants in the first half of this year has reversed some of these positive gains and the number of people currently served by supplies on the RAL stands at approximately 560,000 consumers. This reversal underscores the challenge that, while water quality remains high, drinking water treatment in many supplies is still not as resilient as it needs to be to ensure the supply is safe into the future.

The EPA's 2021 Drinking Water Quality Report which will be published later this week, sets out in detail the main issues affecting the quality of the drinking water supplied by Irish Water that require action including: ensuring adequate disinfection; reducing the levels of trihalomethanes (THMs); poor treatment control processes and the need to replace lead

water mains and household pipes. I would highlight two issues for the purpose of this opening statement:

**Persistent Trihalomethane (THM) Failures:** The number of people affected by persistent trihalomethane (THM) failures (i.e. on the RAL) has increased in 2022 by 133,750 people due to 5 of supplies being added to the RAL. This erodes the progress that was made in 2021 particularly following the commissioning of the new water treatment at Vartry. It should also be noted that the European Commission is progressing infringement proceedings against Ireland for failure to address THM compliance.

**Poor Treatment Control Processes.** At the end of 2021 there were 24 supplies on the RAL for poor treatment control processes. While it is an essential step to have all required infrastructure in place, a water treatment plant must also be managed and operated correctly and be able to adapt and respond to changing conditions and incidents. Essential alarms, monitors and staff training are critical prerequisites for a well-run drinking water treatment plant. Inadequate response to plant alarms was a significant contributor to the incidents in the Gorey and Ballymore Eustace plants which in the case of Gorey resulted in illness and hospitalisations in 2021.

Turning briefly to the issue of boil water notices or water restrictions that are imposed from time to time by Irish Water in consultation with the Health Service Executive. While they are a cause of inconvenience to people, they are necessary to ensure that members of the public do not consume water that could be contaminated and make them ill. Boil water notices increased significantly in 2021 and affected far more people than in 2020 (over 211,000 people affected compared to less than 75,000 during 2020). This increase is attributed to improved vigilance by Irish Water and staff training after the Gorey and Ballymore Eustace incidents. The primary cause for the need to impose such restrictions is a failure in the disinfection or pathogen removal processes. Assessments and improvements under Irish Water's National Disinfection Programme are continuing but clearly have not proved sufficiently robust to mitigate the need for boil water notices.

### **Drinking Water Legislative Framework**

It should be noted that the drinking water legislative framework will undergo a significant amendment with the transposition of the new Drinking Water Directive (EU) 2020/2184

which is due by January 2023 and EPA continues to work with DHLGH and other stakeholders in support of that process. The transposition, which will bring new and ever more challenging drinking water standard requirements, will also provide an opportunity to address some existing gaps in the enforcement regulatory framework identified by EPA.

### **Water Quality in Ireland**

Chair, I would finish with a few remarks about water quality more generally in Ireland. Put succinctly, water quality in Ireland is not as good as it should be. Our rivers, lakes, estuaries and groundwaters continue to be under pressure from human activities such as agriculture, forestry, physical changes such as land drainage, and waste water. Just over half of surface waters are in a satisfactory condition which means that a large number are not in good ecological health. These are unable to sustain healthy ecosystems and are failing to meet the legally binding water quality objectives set by the EU Water Framework Directive because of pollution and other human disturbance. It is essential that urgent action is taken through the implementation of the next River Basin Management Plan to drive and sustain improvements while preventing further deterioration.

### **Closing remarks**

Chair, I would like to assure the Committee that the EPA will continue to monitor and report on water quality issues and to provide regulatory oversight of Irish Water, and work closely with the HSE and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with the primary objective of ensuring the protection of human health and the environment.

Thank you for your attention.