

An Fóram Uisce is concerned for Ireland's Waters

Water is life, underpinning all aspects of how humans survive on our blue planet. Yet, the sources of freshwater that many people rely on every day, such as rivers and lakes, make up only around 0.007% of the total water present on the Earth. This means that our water is a very precious and finite resource.

[Recent research undertaken by NUI Galway](#) on the concerning presence of toxic bacteria in many of Ireland's bathing waters follows on from the [Environmental Protection Agency's recent report](#) on the quality of Ireland's waters 2013-2018. The EPA report highlighted that just under half of Ireland's rivers, streams and lakes are in less than satisfactory condition. The health of our waters is worsening (with a 2.6% decrease in satisfactory status compared to the 2010-2015 period) despite significant investment from the Government to try and improve our water quality. A few short decades ago, Ireland had over 500 hundred pristine rivers of the highest water quality. The number of these pristine sites is now at an all-time low of 20.

So why are our waters in such bad shape? We are a green island where water is considered plentiful, we market our agricultural produce internationally based on a perception of environmental quality, and in normal times visitors flock to our shores to interact with our nature and communities.

Put simply, we are not doing enough to take care of our waters. While improvements in some areas have been made, the statistics on the quality of our waters and associated biodiversity do not make for pleasant reading.

The EPA report stated that nutrient pollution, primarily from agriculture and waste water, is causing one third of our rivers and one quarter of our estuaries to fail to meet their nutrient environmental quality standards. These nutrients can cause excessive plant growth and increase the likelihood of harmful algal blooms. Good agricultural nutrient management practices and improved nutrient recycling in both agriculture and waste water treatment are important actions for improving water quality.

Chemicals such as pesticides are impacting our aquatic plants and wildlife and are contaminating our drinking water supplies. The herbicide MCPA, used to kill weeds, has been detected by the EPA in over half of all rivers monitored. In 2018, MCPA was responsible for three quarters of drinking water quality standard failures due to pesticides.

Ireland has the highest incidence of infection from the toxic VTEC bacteria in Europe. Over 80% of primary cases of VTEC infections are related to contaminated water, with animal (livestock) and human faecal waste being sources of such water contamination.

Civic Offices, Limerick Road,
Nenagh, County Tipperary



A [report from the EPA in 2019](#) stated that untreated sewage from the equivalent of 77,000 people in 36 towns and villages is being discharged into our waters on a daily basis. Waste water treatment at 21 large urban areas, accounting for over half of Ireland's urban waste water, failed to meet EU standards. Delays in making improvements to our waste water treatment plants means that 13 areas will continue releasing raw sewage after 2021.

A [University College Cork research project](#) estimates that the island of Ireland emits 5,700 kg of microplastics per year through industry, landfill, waste water, domestic sources and road surfaces. These microplastics often make their way into our waters, entering the food chain and also our drinking water.

As well as impacting on the quality of our waters, our actions are harming our plants and wildlife. [The latest report on Ireland's biodiversity](#) released in 2019 stated that the conservation status of Ireland's species indicates that many aquatic protected species are faring worst with many having inadequate or bad status.

Important habitats such as wetlands, which naturally protect and clean our waters, are being impacted by planning development, industry, peat extraction and agriculture. The [latest assessment of Ireland's environment](#) in 2016 highlighted that Ireland's peatlands have declined in range, area, structure, function and ecological status.

Water appears to be plentiful in Ireland and as a general public we tend to be averse to water conservation measures. This is despite the likely reduced water availability due to the climate emergency, population growth, planning decisions and the way in which we use our land.

Following a dry spell this Spring, we are already seeing lower river and groundwater levels throughout the country and these can be observed via the [EPA's Hydronet website](#). Yet, there is no publicly available forecasting tool available to see whether our localities are under water stress and whether we should be considering how we use our water on a daily basis. Our experiences of the drought in summer 2018 and how our water consumption reduced following a campaign for water conservation by Irish Water show that we can take responsibility and reduce our water consumption when needed. If dry conditions persist over the coming months, how water conservation measures may be enacted during a time of a global pandemic, where water and hygiene is crucial to combatting the spread of COVID-19, remains to be seen.

In short, we do not sufficiently value our waters or the water which flows freely from our taps. This is despite [the myriad of services](#) water provides to our lives: drinking water, sport and recreation, mental health, agriculture, industry, and tourism, to name just a few.

So, what can be done? As a first step, we all need to take a collective responsibility as to how we value our waters. The Government must take responsibility for further investment in protecting and restoring our waters. Irish Water must protect and improve our drinking water supplies, our infrastructure and our wastewater treatment. The agricultural sector plays a vital role in Ireland's

Civic Offices, Limerick Road,
Nenagh, County Tipperary



economy and way of life and it is essential that the sector is included in solutions for improving water quality. The general public must also play its part.

The Government is currently undertaking a public consultation process on identifying the Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI) which impact on our waters and water quality. We all have the opportunity to have a say in how the quality of our waters can be improved. We shouldn't accept that our waters are deteriorating in quality, or that raw sewage is still being pumped into our rivers and coastal waters. The SWMI public consultation can be found on the [Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government's website](#) and by responding before the end of June 2020 we can all have a say in how our waters are managed.

The identification of these Significant Water Management Issues is the first step in moving towards Ireland's next period of managing our waters through the national River Basin Management Plan (RBMP). This is the formal mechanism for how our waters are managed and how Ireland reports to the EU on its legislative responsibilities regarding water management. There will be opportunity to have your say on the next RBMP from December 2020 when the draft plan for the period 2021-2027 is released for public consultation. But questions remain on how the actions of the current Plan for 2018-2021 are progressing.

While it is recognised that it takes time for improvements in water quality to be seen, we have a long way to go to see the quality of our waters return to where they need to be, not only to comply with legislation, but for our own public health and wellbeing.

There are ways in which everybody can become more involved in their local waters. The Local Authority Waters Programme ([LAWPRO](#)) is responsible for encouraging community participation in local water management; and new organisations such as River Trusts and Catchment Partnerships are being formed throughout the country, specifically focussing on local community-led action for improving the quality of our waters. Everyone can get involved.

[An Fóram Uisce | The Water Forum](#) is calling for us all to examine our own behaviour as to how we use and interact with our waters, and to take collective action to improve the quality of our most precious resource: Water.

Note to editors

The author, Dr Alec Rolston, is Research Lead for An Fóram Uisce. Contact: alec@nationalwaterforum.ie or [@TugOfWater](#)

An Fóram Uisce | The Water Forum was established as a statutory body in June 2018 to facilitate stakeholder engagement and debate on issues relating to water as a resource, water quality, rural water concerns, issues affecting customers of Irish Water and issues associated with the implementation of the Water Framework Directive.

The Forum consists of 27 representatives from a wide range of organisations with direct connections to issues relating to water quality. These include consumer, community and water sports groups, business and trade unions, environmental sector, Irish Water consumers, the group water scheme sector and a range of other sectors including education, agriculture, fisheries and forestry. The Forum is chaired by Dr Tom Collins.