

PRESS RELEASE Farming and the future

Ireland's water quality is declining and 53% of water bodies are at risk of not achieving good ecological status. According to the [EPA](#), agriculture is the single biggest pressure contributing to pollution with one third of rivers and lakes and one quarter of estuaries having excess nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorous) and the concentrations are continuing to rise. Other significant pressures on water quality from agriculture include pesticides, sediment and harmful bacteria and viruses. There are 139,600 farm holdings in Ireland and most of them produce agricultural nutrients (manure, slurry) and use chemical fertilisers to promote growth on the farm. The improper use of fertilisers, inadequate storage, poor application practice for local soil conditions can result in nutrients entering streams and rivers causing pollution and leading to excessive growth of algae and reduced oxygen levels.

The Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) first introduced in 2006 is designed to prevent pollution of surface waters and groundwater. The fifth iteration of the NAP is currently in development, and this has resulted in a flurry of debate and discussions.

The principal elements of the NAP include:

- limits on farm stocking rates
- legal maxima for nitrogen and phosphorus application rates
- prohibited spreading periods preventing the application of organic and chemical fertilisers during more environmentally vulnerable times of the year
- minimum storage requirements for livestock manures
- requirements regarding maintenance of green cover in tillage lands and
- set-back distances from waters.

The area of intensively farmed land has increased by 34% between 2014 and 2018, these farms produce over the legal limit of nutrients and therefore need to apply for 'derogation'. There are now over 7,000 approved 'derogation farms' and these farmers are required to implement additional measures to protect the local environment.

The [EPA](#) reports that 85% of nitrogen in rural catchments comes from agriculture and while the impacts are in catchments all over the country there are increasing trends in the east and southeast of the country, with subsequent nutrient enrichment in coastal areas. Phosphorus is a significant pressure on water quality in catchments with heavy clay soils prone to overland flow and again there are increasing trends recorded in rivers in the east and the south.

Farmers are facing a myriad of challenges over the coming years, not only to protect water quality but also to address the climate and biodiversity crises. According to the [EPA](#), farming is responsible for 33% of Greenhouse Gas emissions contributing to climate change and the process of farm intensification results in significant biodiversity loss thereby adding to the biodiversity crises. While agriculture is a significant part of the problem, farmers are also the cornerstone of the solution. Farmers are the primary custodians of their environment, and An Fóram Uisce – The Water Forum believes it is vital that they are supported through education and training in sustainable farming to allow them to participate in the development of local, targeted measures to address water quality, climate mitigation and biodiversity protection. It is an imperative and in everyone's interest that

change in practice happens now and that change in practice results in improved environmental outcomes.

In recent years significant progress has been made in understanding catchments and the pressures that are impacting on water quality. The EPA catchments unit have developed and made available Pollution Impact Potential Maps that rank the relative risk areas within the landscape for diffuse phosphorus to surface waters and diffuse nitrogen to surface or groundwater. The Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) have spent 3 years characterising 191 catchments and identifying critical source areas for pollutants entering waterways and potential point and diffuse sources of pollution. The Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) has been working with farmers in these priority catchments to undertake measures to protect water quality. ASSAP and LAWPRO have facilitated training programmes with farmers in Priority Areas for Actions (river catchments identified for improvement in the River Basin Management Plan). Teagasc's Agricultural Catchments Programme (ACP) has also provided learnings on the effectiveness of current derogation measures and one of their key findings is that supporting farmers to make better decisions regarding how they manage nutrient applications is likely to be the single area with the greatest potential to improve outcomes for water quality.

This scientific data allows for the right measure to be implemented on the right farm to protect water quality, so agencies can work with farmers to prevent detrimental impacts on the local environment. Many of the actions identified to protect water such as buffer strips, fencing, protecting wetlands will also have positive outcomes for biodiversity and climate change.

The remaining and possibly the most thorny of issues is how will the measures be paid for. Reduced stocking rates, increased storage capacity, protecting wetlands, installing buffer strips and fencing all have a cost attached and essentially reduce farmers income. The Water Forum supports the principle of public money for public good but protecting and restoring the increasing needs of nature is not cheap. With important policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy, Climate and Biodiversity Action Plans and the Nitrates Action Programme and the draft River Basin Management Plan all at development stage, there is a unique opportunity to streamline actions and funding for the most effective environmental outcomes.

The Forum would like to see greater social discourse on how the measures required by these policies will be funded in the years ahead. Everyone knows that comprehensive action now is the intelligent economic option as the cost of making good when the environmental harm is done will not just be an economic one but has implications for the health and well-being of society.

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[An Fóram Uisce Submission to DHGLH on 2nd Stage Nitrates Action Programme Consultation](#)

Note to the Editor

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 26 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 Prof. Tom Collins.

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Reference: [State of the Environment | Environmental Protection Agency \(epa.ie\)](#)