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Subject: EPA Water Quality Report Highlights Need for Accelerated Action to Protect and Restore our water environment

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has today published its latest Water Quality in Ireland Report, which shows that only 52% of our surface waters (rivers, lakes, canals, estuaries and coastal waters) are in good or high ecological status.

Unfortunately, this is a decline from 54% since the previous assessment was made in 2021.

This 2% in decline overall indicates that the pace of improvement in Ireland's waters remains below that required to achieve the objectives of the EU Water Framework Directive – where all waters should be at good or high status by 2027.

Today's EPA report has however highlighted some progress; the quality of coastal waters and groundwaters has improved slightly over the assessment period. Furthermore, while nitrate concentrations are still too high in many river sites, concentrations have reduced in 39% of sites when compared with the previous assessment. It will be important to determine what drove this reduction in nitrate to acknowledge if and where targeted measures have achieved water quality outcomes. In contrast, 16% of river sites had increasing phosphorus concentrations, a worrying trend in this nutrient, despite efforts to reduce nutrient pollution across different sectors.

The Water Forum welcomes this EPA Water Quality Report, which will be invaluable to identify targeted measures to protect and improve water quality for the 4th Water Action Plan. The report will also support the Water Forum to develop policy advice to the Minister and the Water Policy Advisory Committee on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive in Ireland.

The Forum acknowledges that there have been developments in governance and implementation structures under the 3rd Water Action Plan, including the introduction of sectoral action plans, the piloting of catchment management plans, and the piloting of catchment community fora. However, the Forum is of the view that there is a need for urgency to move decisively from planning to implementation for the remainder of the 3rd Water Action Plan and into the 4th Cycle. The Water Forum Chair, Dr. Matt Crowe has stated that “An outcomes-based approach is essential—one that focuses on targeted measures delivering measurable improvements in water quality”. The Forum has

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previously recommended to the Water Policy Advisory Committee that the overall objective of the recently developed Sectoral Action Work Plans should be the removal of each sector as a pressure on water quality. The Water Forum also emphasises the importance of deeper engagement with local communities, whose participation and stewardship will be vital to delivering action on the ground.

Dr Crowe states that we need “a relentless focus on implementation, allowing new plans and structures to evolve and improve. “

The Water Forum remains committed to supporting collaborative, evidence-led action to protect and enhance Ireland’s water environment for the benefit of communities, nature, and future generations.

Note to the Editor

The Water Forum (An Fóram Uisce) was established in 2018 to provide a platform for public engagement on all matters relating to water management in Ireland and the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. It consists of 25 members including representatives from a wide range of organisations and sectors with an interest in water issues that includes the environmental sector, the agricultural sector, consumers including customers of Irish Water, the rural water sector, rivers trusts, angling, business sector, trade unions, the community and voluntary sector, forestry, education, social housing and tourism.

In accordance with the Water Services Act, 2017, the Forum has advisory roles in relation to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), Irish Water (IW), the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) and the Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC). The Forum is chaired by Dr Matt Crowe.

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