

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sustainable Water Network (SWAN): ‘Lack of political will at root of sewage pollution’

12 November 2020: The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is calling for immediate action from government to dramatically improve Ireland’s waste water infrastructure, following today’s publication of a report from the EPA on Urban Waste Water Treatment.[1]

The report highlights that raw sewage from 35 towns and villages flows into our water every day and waste water treatment in 19 urban areas fails to meet minimum legal standards. Sewage is the main source of pollution in 48 areas and is the primary reason these waters are unhealthy and failing mandatory standards under the EU Water Framework Directive.

EU law requires that these polluted areas be restored by 2021, yet Irish Water has no clear action plan for almost half of them (23 out of 48). Last year the European Court of Justice found that Ireland was failing to meet obligations of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, and the state is now at risk of incurring significant fines if the situation isn’t remedied swiftly.[2]

The network of 25 environmental organisations has highlighted decades of lack of investment and lack of political will as the root cause of this failure to deliver a most basic public service vital for the protection of public health and the environment.

Sinéad O’Brien, SWAN Coordinator said: “The fact that raw sewage is still being discharged into our rivers, lakes and sea is completely unacceptable. Lack of effective wastewater treatment is damaging our water environment and posing a significant public health risk. Treating human waste adequately so that it can be safely released to the environment is one of the most fundamental requirements of a modern state; yet more than 25 years after this most basic obligation was enshrined in EU and Irish law, we are still failing to deliver it.

“During pandemic restrictions, people across the country rediscovered our beautiful beaches, lakes and rivers – but many quickly experienced the reality of under-resourced, ineffective waste water infrastructure, as sewage overflows caused by heavy rain resulted in unpleasant encounters with sanitary waste and frequent bathing restrictions. Wastewater discharges are a key factor in our continually declining water quality and pose a serious threat to sensitive habitats and species.

“Despite the fact that the EPA has been highlighting this issue since the 1990s, successive governments have neglected our sewage infrastructure and failed to provide the necessary investment to prevent pollution of our rivers, lakes and coast with human waste. Adequate resourcing for urgent improvements to our waste water infrastructure must be prioritised by this government. The Irish public and EU courts are rightly running out of patience.”

ENDS

Spokespeople available, please contact:

SWAN Communications Officer, Sinéad Corcoran: 0871272042

Notes to editor:

1. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), [Urban Waste Water Treatment in 2019](#).
2. European Commission, [Commission takes Ireland to Court for failure to upgrade waste water treatment infrastructure](#), 2017

The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is an umbrella network of twenty-five national and local environmental groups working together for the protection and sustainable management of Ireland's water environment.

SWAN Members: An Taisce, Bat Conservation Ireland, BirdWatch Ireland, Carra/Mask/Corrib Water Protection Group, Cavan Leitrim Environmental Awareness Network, Celebrate Water, Coastal Concern Alliance (Associate), Coastwatch, Coomhola Salmon Trust, Cork Environmental Forum, Cork Nature Network, Dodder Action, ECO-UNESCO, Friends of the Earth, Friends of the Irish Environment, Irish Peatland Conservation Council, Irish Seal Sanctuary, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Irish Wildlife Trust, Longford Environmental Alliance, Macroom District Environmental Group, River Shannon Protection Alliance, Save the Swilly, Slaney River Trust, Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment (VOICE).