

## IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### **Sustainable Water Network (SWAN): Water pollution crisis fuelled by reckless intensification of agriculture**

**15 December 2020:** The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) is calling for immediate action from Government to address dramatic increases in pollution of our rivers, lakes and bays, following today's publication of a report on water quality from the EPA.[1]

The report highlights that one third of our rivers and a quarter of our lakes are failing water quality standards for nitrogen and phosphorus, the leading pollutants of water. Critically, trends have swung in the wrong direction, with nitrate pollution on the rise in nearly half of our rivers (47%). This is **a 30-fold increase** on pre-2015 trends for nitrates when only a tiny proportion (1.4%) of sites were showing increases.

The report identifies intensive agricultural practices as the predominant source of excess nitrates, and it links escalating pollution (particularly in the south and south east) to increased agriculture intensification.

EU water law requires that all our waters must be in a healthy state by 2027 and it prohibits deterioration from 2009 water quality standards.[2] It also requires, under the Nitrates Directive, that the state reduces water pollution caused by nitrates and phosphates from agricultural sources.[3] The state is clearly failing in this duty and if the situation isn't remedied swiftly, we are at risk of incurring significant fines and losing our 'Nitrates Derogation' on which the intensive dairy industry depends.[4]

The network of 25 environmental organisations has highlighted years of irresponsible agricultural policy which drives intensification as the main cause of water quality declines. The network has warned that an immediate shift towards agricultural policy that works with nature is needed in order to protect the environment and public health.

**Sinéad O'Brien, SWAN Coordinator said:** "This report has revealed an alarming and unprecedented rise in water pollution, the scale of which has not been seen in many years. This is nothing short of a water pollution crisis. It is clear from this report (along with other recent EPA work) that this crisis is directly linked to agricultural intensification. The state has embarked recklessly on a policy of aggressive agricultural expansion, particularly in the dairy sector from 2015. It did so despite clear warnings from scientists and from SWAN member groups about the environmental risks. We're now seeing the consequences of that irresponsible decision.

"We hear a lot of rhetoric about agricultural sustainability and Irish farming's 'green' reputation, but the statistics released today make a lie of that. It truly is 'green-washing', and it is important for the public to know that contrary to the marketing, Irish dairy products are now sadly often linked to pollution of our rivers, lakes and beaches. The fact that there are 30 times more river sites with increasing levels of nitrate pollution than there were five years ago only means one thing – agricultural pollution is getting worse and current policy is not working. Instead of addressing this crisis, Irish agricultural policy continues to support and promote intensification. Just last month, Teagasc predicted that the dairy herd will increase by over 12% by 2027.

“Water is a public good. Clean water is essential for wildlife, biodiversity, public health and human well-being. It is time to recognise the crisis we are facing and respond with appropriate urgency and action. We need to see a dramatic shift in agricultural policy, to an approach that protects and restores our rivers, lakes and coastal waters. There are many farmers in this country working hard to farm in a water and nature friendly way, those methods need to be rewarded.”

## **ENDS**

### **Notes to editor:**

1. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Water Quality Indicators Report 2019:  
<https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/waterqua/waterqualityin2019-anindicatorsreport.html>
2. The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) - integrated river basin management for Europe:  
[https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index_en.html)
3. The Nitrates Directive: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-nitrates/index\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-nitrates/index_en.html)
4. The Nitrates Directive further requires the implementation of “measures [that] will ensure that, for each farm or livestock unit, the amount of livestock manure applied to the land each year, including by the animals themselves, shall not exceed .. ... the amount of manure containing 170 kg N”. To allow the extremely high growth projections for agri-industry, which would otherwise not be possible, Ireland has secured a derogation from this requirement.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-nitrates/index\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-nitrates/index_en.html)

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).