

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Environmental groups support Oireachtas Committee call for major changes to flawed water abstraction Bill

Dublin, 25 January 2021 - The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) welcomes the findings and recommendations of the report from the Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the Water Environment (Abstractions) Bill expected for publication today. The network of 25 environmental organisations is urging the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to take on board the Committee's recommendations and amend Bill accordingly.

Last year, the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) warned legislators that the proposed Water Environment (Abstractions) Bill was in breach of key EU environmental directives including the EU Water Framework Directive, a view later echoed by the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers.

SWAN also flagged that the Bill set regulation thresholds so high that a substantial majority of water abstractions would remain unregistered and unmonitored, potentially having serious implications for the local environment and future rural water supply.[1]

The cross-party Oireachtas Committee is expected to publish today a unanimous report highlighting key flaws with the Water Environment (Abstractions) Bill and proposing clear recommendations to bring the proposed legislation in line with EU law and with corresponding laws in neighbouring jurisdictions such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Sinéad O'Brien, SWAN Coordinator said: "We very much welcome the report from the Oireachtas Committee and the fact that it has adopted many of our recommendations. The proposed Bill is very much light touch regulation and very simply, would fail to comply with EU law. As it stands, the Bill is a long way off providing meaningful controls of the extraction of our most precious resource. It sets exemption thresholds so ridiculously high that the majority of water abstractions would remain unmonitored and unregulated, including agricultural and commercial abstractions.

"Over-abstraction of water creates all sorts of risks for the local environment including potential depletion of wetlands and damage to biodiversity. With climate change, we're likely to see future droughts and increased water shortages; we must closely monitor and regulate our water resources now, to protect them for the future. We're urging the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to adopt the recommendations of this report and get this legislation right to protect our water environment and future water supply."

ENDS

Spokespeople available, please contact:

SWAN Communications Officer, Sinéad Corcoran: 0871272042

Notes to editor:

Water abstraction (or water extraction) is the process of taking water from any source, either temporarily or permanently for irrigation, industry, recreation, flood control or treatment to produce drinking water.

1. The General Scheme of the 'Water Environment (Abstractions) Bill' proposes a registration exemption threshold of 25 cubic metres (25,000 litres) per day – any abstraction points abstracting less than this amount do not require registration. This equates to approximately enough water to fill 104 wheelie bins daily.

The Bill proposes a licencing exemption threshold of daily abstraction rates of 2000 cubic metres (2,000,000 litres) or 250 cubic metres (250,000 litres) in areas of significance, any abstraction points abstracting less than this amount do not require a licence. 2000 cubic metres is enough water to support a medium sized town (9,200 people, 3,360 households) or 16,000 dairy cows. 250 cubic metres is enough water to supply 420 households.

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).