

Water NGOs in Ireland support environmental sector withdrawal from state agri-food committee and warn of water quality crisis

Dublin, Ireland, 26 February 2021: The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) supports the Environmental Pillar's withdrawal from the Irish state's 2030 Agri-Food Strategy Committee.[1] The soon to be published national 2030 Agri-Food Strategy is set to propose a 'business-as-usual' approach to food production, which perpetuates intensive agriculture and ignores calls for the dramatic policy shift needed to urgently address the multiple environmental crises we face in Ireland.

The Agri-Food Strategy Committee was established in 2019 to lead the development of Ireland's national Agri-Food Strategy which is due for publication next month.[2] The draft strategy document seeks to position Ireland as an international leader in sustainable food systems, yet all the environmental indicators show that Ireland's food system is anything but sustainable at home.

Ireland's water environment is in crisis. Water quality is declining and water pollution is rising at an unprecedented rate, with more than half of our rivers, lakes and estuaries in an unhealthy state (47%, 50% and 62% respectively).[3] Agriculture is well documented as the most significant pressure on the Irish water environment and a key cause of water quality declines.[4]

SWAN has highlighted years of irresponsible agricultural policy which promotes intensification as the driving force of water-polluting farming practices. The network has warned that an immediate shift towards an agricultural policy that works with nature is needed in order to protect the environment and public health.

Increasing levels of agricultural pollution is not only causing destruction of our water and wetland environment, but is putting Ireland at risk of penalties due to violations of a key EU water law.[5]

SWAN, along with the Environmental Pillar and Stop Climate Chaos, have produced an alternative roadmap for agricultural policy in Ireland. The roadmap outlines a vision for a new agriculture and food production system which protects nature, water and air, cuts climate emissions, and supports small-scale farmers and global food security. It is set to be published in the coming weeks.

Sinéad O'Brien, SWAN Coordinator said: "Agriculture is the biggest pressure on our water environment. It's the cause of increases in water pollution from fertilisers and slurry, declining biodiversity in rivers, and the destruction of habitats as more and more wetlands are drained to increase grass production to feed livestock. The current approach of agricultural intensification, particularly dairy intensification, must stop. Our water environment simply cannot sustain it.

"Last year the Environmental Protection Agency reported unprecedented increases in the level of water pollution. We're facing a very near future of dramatically polluted rivers and lakes with

a noticeable absence of wildlife, along with increased groundwater pollution which will contaminate drinking water. Water is a public good. Clean water is essential for wildlife, biodiversity, public health and human well-being. It is time to recognise the very serious 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. It is very regrettable that this key opportunity to shift our agricultural approach and establish Ireland as a true leader in sustainable food production is set to be squandered.”

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Notes to editor:

1. Environmental Pillar Press Release (2021): ‘The Environmental Pillar withdraws from the problematic 2030 Agri-Food Strategy Committee’ <https://environmentalpillar.ie/the-environmental-pillar-withdraws-from-the-problematic-2030-agri-food-strategy-committee/>
 2. Department of Agriculture Food and Marine Press Release (2019): ‘Creed announces Stakeholder Committee to develop Ireland’s Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 and opens first meeting’. <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a81790-creed-announces-stakeholder-committee-to-develop-irelands-agri-food-/?referrer=http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/press/pressreleases/2019/november/title,136214,en.html>
 3. Environmental Protection Agency (2019) ‘Water Quality in Ireland 2013 – 2018’, [https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/waterqua/Water%20Quality%20in%20Ireland%202013-2018%20\(web\).pdf](https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/waterqua/Water%20Quality%20in%20Ireland%202013-2018%20(web).pdf)
- Environmental Protection Agency (2020) ‘Water Quality Indicators Report 2019’, <https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/waterqua/waterqualityin2019-anindicatorsreport.html>
4. Environmental Protection Agency (2020) Ireland’s Environment – An Integrated Assessment 2020, <http://www.epa.ie/irelandsenvironment/stateoftheenvironmentreport/>
- Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (2018). ‘River Basin Management Plan for Ireland 2018 - 2021’, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/429a79-river-basin-management-plan-2018-2021/?referrer=http://www.housing.gov.ie/water/water-quality/river-basin-management-plans/river-basin-management-plan-2018-2021>
5. The EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) - integrated river basin management for Europe: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/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).