

Healthy Waters General Election Manifesto



Introduction

The incoming members of the 34th Dáil and Seanad will be responsible for delivering on a range of EU and national legal targets for improving water quality, reversing pollution and restoring our rivers, lakes, coastal and groundwaters.

Water pollution is the environmental hazard the Irish public is the most worried about,¹ yet the EPA has reported that almost half of our waters are unhealthy and pollution is increasing in many parts of the country. It's vital that political parties reflect public concern about this by adequately addressing water pollution and degradation in their manifestos. The four main causes (or pressures) have been identified as run-off from agriculture and forestry, discharges of raw and inadequately treated sewage, and physical damage (e.g. to river channels & banks and lake shores). The recommendations set out in this manifesto would address these pressures and reverse pollution.

Ensuring healthy rivers, lakes and beaches for all

The EU Water Framework Directive requires all our rivers, lakes, bays and coasts to be restored to at least 'good status' (ecologically healthy) by 2027. Ireland's 3rd River Basin Management Plan, called the Water Action Plan, has set out a programme of measures that must be implemented by the next government with the goal of reaching this target. However, the plan itself currently projects that the measures it contains will only restore 9-18%² of unhealthy and 'at risk' waterbodies, leaving about two-fifths (40-43%) of all our rivers, lakes and coastal waters unhealthy at the end of the plan. This is unacceptable.

The plan recognises this shortfall and has provided for the identification and implementation of additional measures where gaps exist. The next Programme for Government must include the necessary measures to bridge the gap and ensure that legal obligations for water quality [and ecological health] are met. SWAN has outlined in this document five priority measures in order to achieve this.

Protecting and restoring our seas for all

The EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy requires 30% of Irish seas to be designated as protected areas, with 10% as strictly protected. To do this we need to see the progression, enactment and implementation of a strong Marine Protected Area (MPA) Bill by the incoming government. SWAN is a partner of the Fair Seas campaign and we are including Fair Seas' recommendation on MPAs in our manifesto to further emphasise the need for this.

1. 79% of the Irish population say they are either 'very worried' or 'somewhat worried' about water pollution harming their local area. See [The Environmental Protection Agency Climate Change Report \(2024\)](https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring-assessment/climate-change/Climate-Change-in-the-Irish-Mind-Wave-2-Report-1.pdf)

2. [Water Action Plan \(2024\)](https://assets.gov.ie/294556/8d6858e0-8ad4-4e87-bc0b-40ee9f219a2c.pdf)

SWAN's five main manifesto recommendations:

1

Water Framework Directive risk assessments for all intensive farms must be implemented, including derogation farms, through a permitting/licensing system similar to pigs and poultry. Intensification should only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that it won't impact on water quality. The risk assessments must take into account catchment-scale cumulative impacts and be informed by the EPA Pollution Impact Potential (PIP) and other maps.

Agriculture is by far the most significant pressure on the Irish water environment. Despite the clear link between intensive livestock farming and worsening water pollution, there is no specific risk assessment required before the stocking density on a farm is increased [or a farm is granted a derogation], even if it is in a critical source area for nitrate loss. By allowing stocking rates that are based on catchment carrying capacity, certain farms would be able to continue with a derogation if it could be demonstrated that they won't impact on the Water Framework Directive objectives for the associated water bodies.

2

All wastewater plants and systems, identified as significant sewage pollution sources (impacting 197 water bodies) must be urgently upgraded as soon as is technically feasible. Any delays beyond 2027 must meet strict Water Framework Directive exemption criteria. Part of the Apple Tax Funds must be used to expedite this work, based on pollution risk.

The EPA has said that enough raw sewage is released into our seas and rivers every day to fill three Olympic swimming pools and that progress by Uisce Eireann to halt pollution is "far too slow"³. In order to protect human health and support the urgently needed increases in housing, a very significant increased investment in wastewater infrastructure is needed.

3

Forestry impacts, especially from damaging planting and felling practices, must be halted by ensuring licensing includes site-specific stipulations for water protection, taking account of catchment-scale cumulative impacts and the legal requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

Forestry is the third most significant pressure on the Irish water environment and has a particularly serious impact on our most pristine upland rivers. With a 60% increase in forest cover targeted, it is vital that vulnerable catchments are identified and protected so as to ensure only the planting of "the right tree in the right place".

4

The Arterial Drainage Act 1945 must be reformed to remove the legal requirement to maintain river dredging and drainage to ensure compliance with EU environmental law.

Physical works such as deepening and straightening of rivers and clearance of riverbanks (known as 'hydromorphological alterations') have been identified as the second biggest threat to our rivers. A review of the outdated Arterial Drainage Act is committed to in the Water Action Plan. The incoming government must carry out this commitment and reform the law if we are to meet our WFD objectives and restore thousands of kms of degraded rivers back to good health.

5

Develop an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas in Irish waters with at least 30% of the maritime area designated as Marine Protected Areas by 2030, with 10% 'strictly' protected in line with the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, and implemented with a strong management framework.

In line with the EU's 2030 Biodiversity Strategy, the government must designate 30% of Ireland's seas as a Marine Protected Area (MPA), including 10% strictly protected, by 2030, a commitment which should also be enshrined in domestic MPA legislation. It is crucial that these protected areas are managed in the right way, with active community involvement and stakeholder engagement, in order to deliver the boost to the biodiversity that they are designated to protect.

3. Environmental Protection Agency Urban Waste Water Treatment Report (2023)

<https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring-assessment/waste-water/Urban-Waste-Water-Treatment-in-2022-Report.pdf>