

Press release: 23 June 2020

Key EU water law to remain – Ireland must get to work without delay to turn the tide of decline in our water environment says the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN)

In a landmark development for Europe's rivers, lakes, coasts and wetlands, following a two-year review [1], the European Commission announced that key water law - the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) [2] - will not be changed [3]. The law requires that 100% of the EU's freshwater and coastal ecosystems are in good health by 2027. This gives Ireland seven years to halt declines in our water environment and dramatically improve the health of our freshwater and coastal ecosystems.

Ireland has a long way to go to meet the 2027 targets. Presently, more than half of our rivers, lakes and estuaries are in an unhealthy state (47%, 50% and 62% respectively) and river water pollution is on the rise. Furthermore, we've lost most of our pristine river stretches, down from over 500 in the late 80s to a mere 20 today [4]. An ambitious approach including far reaching agricultural reform, planning controls and wastewater investment is urgently needed to turn the tide of decline in our water environment.

Sinéad O'Brien, Coordinator of the Sustainable Water Network (SWAN) said:

"This very welcome announcement lays to rest any doubt that Ireland must comply fully with the EU Water Framework Directive by 2027. With more than half of our rivers, lakes and estuaries in an unhealthy state, we need urgent action to restore and protect them; we haven't a minute to lose.

"The independent evaluation of the WFD found that the lack of progress in improving water quality across Europe wasn't due to any flaws in the law, but rather a lack of funding and implementation of water protection measures. This analysis is spot-on for Ireland. Rather than tackle the challenge of coming up with an all-of-government land use and water management action plan, EU member states (Ireland included) have dodged and delayed, holding out for extensions and exemptions. These 'get-out-of-jail cards' are now off the table and the WFD requirements stand. This means we have seven short years to dramatically improve the health of our rivers, lakes and coast.

"We're approaching the last cycle of River Basin Management Planning (Ireland's plan for implementing the WFD). This plan must go beyond anything we've seen before. We need serious agricultural policy reform including a reduction of fertiliser use (by 20%) and pesticides (by 50%) in line with the EU Farm to Fork Strategy and a shift of CAP payments to support farming methods which prevent water pollution rather than cause it and which support aquatic biodiversity. These changes need to be implemented as part of the current development of the CAP Strategic Plan and AgriFood Strategy 2030. In addition, proper controls of damaging dredging, drainage and river works need to be introduced as a matter of urgency, and we need a significant ramping up of state investment in our wastewater

infrastructure to eliminate widespread sewage pollution and the all too frequent bathing water restrictions.

“A small number of river catchments (Priority Areas for Action) are being targeted for coordinated management, underpinned by strong science generated by the EPA and new Local Authorities Water Programme, but we now need this work to translate into river action plans and to be extended nationwide. We need a real focus on implementation of effective measures in every river catchment, which must be accompanied by a fundamental shift in state policy away from the ‘business as usual’ model of agricultural intensification and wastewater under-investment. Otherwise, we face significant fines, loss of Ireland’s green marketing advantage and a diminished and polluted water environment.”

ENDS

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Notes to editor:

[1] This announcement from the European Commission follows a two-year [policy evaluation and fitness check](#). Over the course of this process, more than 375,000 citizens and almost 6000 scientists called for the law to be kept in its current form and to be better implemented by member states. A number of Irish NGOs, citizens and scientists joined this call.

[2] The [Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC](#) is an EU directive which commits European Union member states to achieve good ecological status of all water bodies (including marine waters up to one nautical mile from shore) by 2027.

[3] ENDS Europe ‘[Commission praised for confirming no change to the Water Framework Directive](#)’

[4] EPA (2019) ‘[Water Quality in Ireland 2013 – 2018](#)’

The Sustainable Water Network (SWAN), is an umbrella network of twenty-four national and local environmental groups working together for the protection and sustainable management of Ireland’s aquatic environment, especially through participation in the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. SWAN members are: An Taisce; Bat Conservation Ireland; BirdWatch Ireland; Carra/Mask/Corrib Water Protection Group; Cavan Leitrim Environmental Awareness Network; Celebrate Water; 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.