

Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Meeting – Wednesday 20 March 2024

“Compliance with the Nitrates Directive: Implications for Ireland”

Opening Statement on behalf of Uisce Éireann

Good afternoon An Cathaoirleach, Members of the Committee.

We thank you for the invitation to attend today’s discussion on the Nitrates Derogation, with our colleagues from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), the Local Authorities Waters Programme (LAWPRO) and Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI).

I am Niall Horgan, Wastewater Compliance Senior Manager at Uisce Éireann, working in our Environmental Regulation team and I am joined by my colleague Lorraine Gaston, Asset Strategy Technical Lead working in the Catchment Management Team.

Uisce Éireann is Ireland’s national publicly owned water services utility

We are responsible for the delivery of secure, safe and sustainable water services for the people of Ireland.

The Water Services Acts 2007-2020 set out the arrangements for, the delivery and oversight of water and wastewater services by Uisce Éireann. To deliver this, we work closely with our economic regulator, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), our environmental regulator, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as well as with the Department, Local Authorities and other bodies.

In terms of today’s discussion

We note the six questions tabled for consideration which focus on implications for the agricultural sector related to the EU Nitrates Directive, Ireland’s Derogation and the Nitrates Action Programme.

Uisce Éireann has no specific responsibilities over this area and so we cannot speak at length to the questions the Committee has posed.

However, Lorraine and I are here today as the organisation's subject matter experts closest to this topic, and we are happy to provide Members with insight from our own work that may be informative for your discussions.

The protection of drinking water sources from the risks associated with a range of influences, including nitrates, is a legal requirement under the Water Framework Directive and the new 2023 Drinking Water Regulations which are in the process of being implemented.

Treatment processes for nitrate removal are technically complex, highly costly and solutions that are sometimes viable in other countries, such as mixing different drinking water sources, are often not feasible in Ireland. Protecting and restoring the quality of raw water, which involves multiple stakeholders, is an effective and sustainable means of reducing the cost of water treatment.

Experience elsewhere has also found that it can be challenging to reverse rising trends of nitrate concentrations in groundwater and therefore prevention of nitrates entering groundwater in the first instance is key.

Engagement and collaboration can support awareness raising and knowledge sharing

Uisce Éireann advocates for a partnership approach for drinking water source protection between public bodies and other stakeholders – including those in the farming and agricultural sectors.

Some examples in this space stem from the second River Basin Management Plan. These include the INTERREG Source to Tap project, a cross-border initiative completed in 2022, and a pilot we are currently running called the Erne-Laragh Water Source Protection Project. The overall aim of these projects is to provide evidence that managing water catchments is an effective way to protect water sources from pesticides.

While not specific to nitrates, both these projects trial catchment scale interventions to reduce the risk of pollution in water supplies. Such interventions are supplementary to the Nitrate Action Plan and are targeted under the principle of “the right measure, in the right place, at the right time”. Examples of interventions include targeting buffer strips in critical areas, fencing of water courses and provision of water troughs and good practice in pesticide use

and storage. The projects also aim to broaden the water awareness agenda and foster active community engagement.

To conclude

We'd like to thank you for the invitation to meet today. This is the first time myself and Lorraine are addressing the Committee and we welcome the opportunity to do so.

We will of course take away any wider queries and respond to the Committee in follow up where requested.

Go raibh maith aghaibh.

ENDS