



Foreword

This is the sixth State of the Environment report published by the EPA since its first such report in 1995, twenty one years ago. These reports provide the national evidence base about the condition of our natural environment and the challenges and opportunities associated with its protection and management. They chart both the successes and failures of national environmental policy over these years and are a critical resource for the State in planning for the next quarter of a century.

Ireland and the world are at a crossroads and the choices we make over the coming decade will have implications for the future of humanity for centuries to come. We are fast approaching the end of the fossil age and we now fully understand the consequences of the large-scale consumption of fossil fuels over the past two centuries for the future health and wellbeing of our planet.

We must now, with a far greater sense of urgency, make the transition from a society and economy dependent on fossil fuels and the wasteful consumption of natural resources to one that uses renewable and clean energy and one that takes much greater care of our precious and non-renewable natural resources. Transformational change is urgently needed across our entire economy and society, change that will affect how we work, how we live, travel, heat our homes, produce our food and use our purchasing power as consumers and citizens.

We have nothing to fear though from these changes. Ireland, in fact, has much to gain by becoming a leader in this transition to a low carbon and resource efficient economy and by making sure that this transition is underpinned by a clean, healthy and well-protected environment.

The overall quality of Ireland's natural environment, the subject of this report, is good in comparison with many other countries and this gives Ireland a competitive economic advantage which is of great value and needs to be protected.

As an island nation, Ireland also has particular vulnerabilities to climate change and so has a strong stake in ensuring that global action on reducing carbon emissions is effective. Ireland now has a clear policy direction and legislation for tackling climate change and the key challenge is to convert this policy intent into action to bring about a transformation in the most carbon intensive sectors like energy, transport and agriculture.

The most pressing issue we face is to work out how we de-carbonise our economy. This will affect all parts of society as we are all dependent on energy for almost everything that we do, and as things stand, most of that energy in Ireland is still generated from fossil fuels. Full and urgent implementation of the White Paper on Energy will be central to making progress, as will the full implementation of a strong and ambitious set of climate mitigation measures and adaptation plans, across all sectors, as required under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act.

While the overall quality of Ireland's natural environment is "good", I would qualify that "good". Many of the problems such as air quality, water pollution, odours and noise in Ireland tend to be localised and these problems can be masked by national level assessments. These localised problems can have severe impacts on the health and wellbeing of the people in affected communities and on the quality of their local environment.

Making the link between environment and health is therefore of critical importance in both understanding and dealing with these problems and this is a key theme of the report. Targeting actions in the right places is also of critical importance if we are to address the problems in both an effective and efficient manner. This applies, for example, to problems with water and air quality which tend to be localised in many cases.

We have in Europe and in Ireland a strong suite of laws for protecting our natural environment. We have made progress in several areas, including waste recycling, reduction in landfilling of waste, bathing water protection, reductions in transboundary pollutants and reducing emissions from industrial facilities. However, we face particular challenges in meeting our climate change commitments and in the implementation of a number of Directives designed to protect the environment, such as the Water Framework

Directive and the Habitats Directive. Ireland also faces open EU complaints or infringement proceedings in relation to drinking water and urban waste water treatment.

This is not about the EU imposing unnecessary or unreasonable demands on Ireland – it is about making sure as a minimum, for example, that the water we drink or swim in will not make us sick.

These are all areas where significant investment is needed to bring Ireland into compliance. Meanwhile, the ‘environment’ has to compete with many other policy areas such as health, education and policing for scarce resources. This is one of the reasons why it is so important that environmental considerations are fully factored into other policy areas as a clean and well protected environment helps support public health, food production, industrial development, tourism and gives an overall sense of civic pride about where we live, work and play.

This report and its many online supporting materials, provides the public, policymakers, non-governmental organisations, community groups, companies, teachers and students with the evidence base about Ireland’s natural environment to help them make informed decisions about what they can do to help both protect and improve our natural environment. The underlying data is available online and we will be keeping this information up to date on the Ireland’s Environment website. I hope that you find the report useful and informative and that it can help you play your part in protecting our environment.

Laura Burke

Director General

20 Years of State of the Environment Reporting 1996-2016

