

2014 in Review

Our objective in the Environmental Protection Agency is a clean, healthy and well protected environment supporting a sustainable society and economy. To achieve this objective we perform effectively a wide range of statutory functions for the protection of the environment. The EPA's mission is '*to protect and improve the environment as a valuable asset for the people of Ireland, and, to protect our people and the environment from harmful effects of radiation and pollution*'.

2014 was an extremely busy year - key actions for the EPA included:

Merger of the EPA and Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII): The merger of the EPA and the RPII, part of the Government's Public Sector Reform Plan, was completed successfully, on time and within budget. The EPA's newly established Office of Radiological Protection commenced operation on 1st August 2014.

EPA Licensing: In 2014, we issued 194 licences and 270 technical amendments. The EPA has a key role in licensing facilities with the potential for significant environmental pollution, to ensure that their emissions do not endanger human health or harm the environment.

Licence Enforcement: As part of our ongoing enforcement activity, we carried out more than 1,350 industrial and waste site visits (i.e. inspections and audits) and assessed more than 8,500 licensee returns and notifications. The EPA believes that rigorous implementation of environmental policy and legislation is good economic policy.

Prosecutions: As part of its ongoing enforcement regime, 14 prosecutions were heard in the district court in 2014. Three civil cases initiated by the EPA were heard in the higher courts. Company directors who flout environmental law are increasingly the subject of legal action by the EPA, a point emphasised in the *Focus on Environmental Enforcement* report, released in June.

Wastewater and Drinking Water: In 2014, the EPA carried out 347 urban wastewater site visits and 62 drinking water site audits. The EPA continues to be the drinking water quality regulator and is responsible for the on-going enforcement of urban wastewater licences now assigned to Irish Water. Irish Water took over the operation of urban wastewater treatment plants and drinking water plants from local authorities.

Drinking Water: The EPA continues to place huge emphasis on the quality of drinking water in Ireland. Public water supplies have improved year-on-year since the EPA created a Remedial Action List in 2008. There are still 121 'at risk' supplies on the Remedial Action List at the start of 2015 and these are the priority for improvement works. Those supplies with inadequate treatment for *Cryptosporidium* are most at risk of water restrictions. Further water improvements are also required because of recent, more stringent standards for lead.

Issuing Directions on Water: The EPA issued 29 directions in 2014; six of these related to supplies in Roscommon. The EPA also reiterated the need for Irish Water to develop a National Strategy for Lead Pipes which has regard to advice previously published by the EPA on lead.

Wastewater: The EPA *Urban Waste Water Report 2013* showed that 38 urban centres across Ireland failed to meet the required standards and placed the health of people and the environment at risk. The reasons for the failures range from, in some instances a complete absence of infrastructure to treat sewage, and in others, inadequate infrastructure or poor management and operation of infrastructure.

Bathing Water: Local authorities reported the results of 1,581 samples to the EPA for the 2013 bathing season from identified bathing waters. With 97 per cent of bathing areas (i.e. 131 of 135) meeting the minimum EU qualifying standard, Ireland's bathing waters continue to be of a very high standard, the Bathing Water Report 2013 confirmed.

Septic tanks: Local Authorities carried out 987 septic tank inspections in the first year of the EPA's *National Inspection Plan for Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems*. The national compliance rate for year-one inspections was 52 per cent. Following the inspections, homeowners started to implement necessary measures to address failures identified and by December 2014, the percentage of systems passing had increased to 76 per cent. The most common reason for failure related to a lack of de-sludging.

Water Framework Directive: During 2014, the EPA took on an expanded role in coordinating and overseeing the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. A new Catchment Management Network was established, involving all local authorities and a range of national agencies, to help improve Ireland's performance in protecting and improving our water resources.

Waste Prevention: 2013 waste figures show there has been a shift away from landfilling towards energy recovery, though deficits in the national waste infrastructure mean there is currently an overreliance on the export of such waste, which is unsustainable.

Smart Farming: National implementation of the Smart Farming initiative began in 2014 following an earlier pilot phase. The programme looks at ways to improve farm returns through better resource management. Thirty on-farm resource efficiency assessments were carried out with an average cost saving of €6,600 per farm identified and more than 600 farmers participated in on-farm discussion groups where the assessment findings were shared. Led by the IFA in conjunction with the EPA, the initiative brings together the knowledge and expertise of other partners including Teagasc, UCD and SEAI.

Sustainable Use of Resources: In 2014, the National Waste Prevention Programme, led by the EPA, continued to deliver substantive results in preventing and minimising waste through its *BeGreen* resource efficiency programmes. In addition to those savings made through its new *Smart Farming* programme, 2014 results from *BeGreen* programmes such as *Green Business*, *Green Hospitality* and *Green Healthcare* identified economic savings in excess of €7 million, with further potential savings of €7m, from an investment by the EPA of approximately €1.2m.

Climate Change: The EPA's greenhouse gas projections, released in May, indicated that Ireland faces considerable challenges in moving to a low carbon economy. Under the best case scenario greenhouse gas emissions will remain relatively static up to 2020. As a result, Ireland will not meet the EU 2020 reduction target of 20 per cent – EPA projections indicate that 2020 emissions will be 5-12 per cent below 2005 levels. Provisional emissions figures for 2013, released in December, show increases in emissions from some sectors, particularly agriculture and transport which are already among the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions.

EPA's Climate Change Lecture Series: In 2014, three Working Group Co-Chairs of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, visited Ireland to give public lectures about current scientific understanding of climate change, possible solutions to the challenges it poses and options for adaptation. Two lectures were webcast and videos, slides and transcripts of all three made available on the EPA's website and You Tube channel.

Clean Air: The EPA's report on air quality in 2013 found that air quality in Ireland continues to be good and compares favourably with other EU Member States. A report on air emissions from EPA licensed sites showed high compliance rates with air pollutant emission limits specified in industrial and waste management licences.

EPA Research: The EPA research programme provides an essential support to meeting and addressing EU and UN obligations on the environment. A new EPA research programme for 2014–2020 is funding research in the areas of Climate, Water and Sustainability. It will involve as many as 600 researchers and industrial innovators over its lifetime.

Research on Fracking: A 24-month research programme on fracking got underway in 2014, following public consultation in 2013. The research programme has been designed to produce the scientific basis which will assist regulators, both North and South, in making an informed decision about whether it is environmentally safe to allow fracking. No fracking will take place as part of the research.

Radiological Protection: Since the merger of the EPA with the RPII on 1st August 2014, the EPA is now the national competent authority for matters to do with ionising radiation. Responsibilities include monitoring radiation levels and assessing the exposure of people in Ireland to ionising radiation.

Radon: In November, the EPA ran a dedicated regional communications campaign to generate awareness of the dangerously high levels of radon in Co Mayo. Mayo has one of the highest incidences of radon in homes in the country.

Accessible Information: The EPA launched a range of web-based information initiatives in 2014. The 'My Local Environment' mapping service is particularly noteworthy and provides easy access to information about the environment close to where people live, work or play.

Conclusion

The EPA plays a key role in environmental regulation, in the provision of knowledge, and in advocacy for the environment. The effects of the economic recession continue to result in cuts right across the public sector - including for the EPA. Both staff and financial resources are reduced and meanwhile we face new challenges and have taken on new responsibilities. Despite these factors, however, due to the hard work and dedication of the staff of the EPA, I am pleased to report that during 2014 we have continued to deliver the valuable societal outcomes for which we are recognised.



Laura Burke
EPA Director General