



A YEAR IN REVIEW – HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2011

Introduction

The quality of Ireland's environment is central to our economic recovery, to the creation of jobs, and to the health and well-being of the nation. Key elements of our national recovery strategy are predicated on a high-quality environment. Our food exports for example rely on the quality of our environment. The same is true of Irish tourism. And last year, an independent review of the Environmental Protection Agency recognised that the Agency, through its work, has provided 'considerable benefit for Ireland's environment and for the health and well-being of its people' and that the environmental expertise within the EPA is a significant national resource.

As Director General of the Environmental Protection Agency since November 2011, I am committed to maintaining the performance of the Agency in protecting and enhancing the quality of our environment. The recent independent Review of the EPA concluded that '*the EPA has the independence to arrive at informed and objective decisions, based on the facts (scientific integrity)*'. I will continue to prioritise objective assessment of the state of our environment and ensure that we continue to provide high quality scientific information. I will also strive, along with all of the staff of the EPA, to highlight to citizens the vital connections that exist between the work that we do in the EPA, a good quality environment, and sustainable economic recovery and growth.

Looking briefly at some highlights from the last year:

Climate Change

Each year the EPA produces greenhouse gas emission inventories, and projections to 2020. These give a picture of Ireland's ability to meet our European and international obligations. Provisional greenhouse gas emissions figures released by the EPA in November 2011 showed that Ireland's emissions fell by 0.69 million tonnes (1.1%) in 2010. Reductions in emissions

were recorded across the transport and waste sectors, while all other sectors showed an increase on 2009 levels. This increase is taking place despite the economy contracting in 2010 and highlights the challenge we face in meeting Ireland's emission reduction targets.

In 2011, we released updated greenhouse gas projections for the period 2010 to 2020. These projections showed that while Ireland is likely to comply with its obligations under the Kyoto Protocol (2008 – 2012), we are not on track as a country to meet our EU 2020 target of reducing our emissions by 20 per cent as compared to 2005 levels. Our projections indicate that even under the most optimistic scenario Ireland is likely to breach its annual obligations (under the EU 2020 target) from 2016 onwards. New policies that move Ireland permanently to a low carbon economy will need to be identified, assessed, adopted and implemented. Reducing emissions from the energy, transport and agriculture sectors will be particularly challenging. Ireland also needs to plan ahead and prepare for the inevitable consequences of climate change and the EPA will continue to support this area through its climate change research programme.

As part of the EPA's outreach programme to increase public awareness of climate change issues, three public lectures on Climate Change were organised and recorded last year. Over 400 people attended each lecture and recordings of each were made available on both the EPA website at www.epa-pictaural.com and on the EPA YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/user/epaireland. International experts addressed themes ranging from sustainable transport and climate smart agriculture to the contribution to climate science of Irish scientist John Tyndall on the 150th anniversary of his scientific discovery of Greenhouse gases.

Clean Air

Last year's EPA report *Air Quality in Ireland 2010* showed that generally air quality in Ireland is high throughout the country, meets all EU standards and is among the best in Europe. This overview is based on data obtained from a national network of 27 monitoring stations. In releasing the report, two areas of concern were emphasised: traffic emissions and the burning of bituminous coal. Levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter remain a concern in Dublin and Cork city centres due to traffic and, in smaller towns, concentrations of particulate matter are elevated due to the use of bituminous coal. Emissions reductions in these areas will have a positive effect on air quality. In 2011, a nationwide 0.7 per cent limit

on sulphur in bituminous coal was introduced by the Department of the Environment and the ban on the sale of bituminous coal was extended from 16 to 20 towns. New regulations further extending the ban are expected in due course. These measures should decrease levels of particulate matter across the country. In addition, the EPA's STRIVE programme is funding a research programme that hopes to provide scientific information on the link between the burning of bituminous coal and high levels of particulate matter.

Water Quality

Ensuring that our drinking water is of the highest quality is vital for public health, for our food industry, for tourism, and for inward investment. The positive downward trend in E.coli in drinking water in recent years continued in 2010, as outlined in the EPA report *The Provision and Quality of Drinking Water in Ireland for the Year 2010*. For the first time, large public drinking water supplies in Ireland, which provide drinking water to almost three million people, show similar levels of E. coli to supplies in England and Wales, and the Netherlands. The EPA became the drinking water supervisory authority in 2007 and has maintained an active Remedial Action List (RAL) since 2008. By the end of 2011, almost half of the drinking water supplies on the original RAL of 339 supplies had completed the necessary remedial works targeted by the EPA. Also by this time, 100 per cent of public drinking water supplies had chlorine monitors installed, up from 30 per cent in 2008/09.

On a similarly positive note, the quality of Ireland's bathing waters remains high. The EPA report *The Quality of Bathing Water in Ireland – An Overview for the Year 2010* showed that 97 per cent of designated bathing areas meet the EU mandatory standards. Bathing water quality information is available throughout the bathing season on the 'Splash' website at www.bathingwater.ie.

The most recent assessment of water quality in our rivers, lakes estuaries and ground waters, published early last year, also found evidence of improvements in water quality - Ireland had better than average water quality when compared with other EU Member States. However, if Ireland is to achieve its European water quality targets under the Water Framework Directive for 2015 onwards, continued actions across a range of sectors are essential. These include eliminating pollution associated with wastewater treatment plants, certain farming activities and septic tank systems as well as enforcing existing legislation to achieve better water

quality. The EPA will continue to work with the network of local authorities, with sectoral groups and with other agencies in tackling the water quality challenges.

The EPA was assigned as regulator of urban wastewater treatment plants in 2009. These were the last significant point source contributing to water pollution not under a licensing regime. During 2011, 66 discharge licences were issued to local authorities bringing the total number of these licences issued to date to 190. In addition, 467 Certificates of Authorisation were issued in 2011 contributing significantly to 512 total number of certificates issued. These licenses and certificates are being enforced by the EPA and we are confident that the regulation of this sector will lead to better outcomes for water quality.

Sustainable Use of Resources

The National Waste Prevention Programme, or NWPP, led by the EPA, aims to deliver substantive results in preventing and minimising waste. The NWPP is cited as best practice by the EU Commission and the OECD. The programme continues to identify annual recurring savings across a number of sectors including for example, business, hospitality and healthcare. In the business sector, there were 479 active online members of *Green Business* by the end of 2011; 45 resource efficiency audits carried out for members during the year identified €6.1 million in possible savings for those businesses. A further 68 businesses had also signed up for certification to the SME-specific *Eco-Cert* programme.

In the hospitality sector, the *Green Hospitality* project increased membership by 20 per cent in 2011. It is estimated that approximately 250 hospitality businesses in Ireland are collectively saving €7.8 million per annum as a result of *Green Hospitality*. And in the healthcare sector, 22 facilities were included in the *Green Healthcare* programme by the end of 2011, representing over 40 per cent of Irish acute hospital beds. In total, 60 waste surveys were carried out during the year. These identified up to €1.6 million of potential savings, including €1 million in food waste and equating to approximately 2,700 tonnes of waste.

Waste figures published by the EPA in February 2011 showed that Ireland is well advanced towards achieving most of its EU waste objectives; we must continue, however, to meet our targets, we must prevent waste arising from all sectors of society. The *National Waste Report 2009* highlighted in particular that continued efforts to divert biodegradable waste from landfill are required as well as improvements in the penetration of source-separated waste collection services – the three-bin service.

There was a significant reduction in the amount of municipal waste generated from a peak of almost 3.4 million tonnes in 2007, to less than three million tonnes in 2009. Figures in the report showed that municipal waste generation fell by 8.4 per cent while household waste generation fell by 3 per cent. Municipal waste recycling achieved a rate of 35 per cent, close to the EU27 norm of 40 per cent. Ireland is also making good progress towards achieving its EU targets for packaging waste, waste electrical goods, the first objectives under the Landfill Directive and also objectives under the new Waste Framework Directive. A recovery rate of 70 per cent was achieved for packaging waste in 2009, exceeding the EU target of 60 per cent by 2011. While the reductions in waste generation and the improvements in recovery seen in 2009 are welcome, we must continue to focus on resource efficiency to ensure that when economic growth does return, it is not accompanied by a surge in waste generation.

Protected Soil and Biodiversity

Two extensive national studies funded under the EPA STRIVE Research programme were completed and published in 2011.

The *Biochange* research project underlined the value and importance of protecting our ecosystems. This report highlighted the need to mainstream biodiversity considerations into planning and governance at national and local levels. The findings of this research will be of real benefit to policy makers in a range of areas such as agriculture, planning and environment management.

The *Bogland: Sustainable management of Peatlands in Ireland* study was the first comprehensive assessment of peatlands (bogs and fens) for Ireland and provides useful guidance to policymakers. It also provides valuable information and context for the work of the recently established Peatlands Council. The report highlighted the important relationship that exists between carbon sequestration, biodiversity and Ireland's peatland resources.

Integration and Enforcement

Following an extensive fire at the Kerdiffstown landfill site in January and February of last year (2011) control of the site was handed to the EPA on 25th February and we began an extensive programme to clean-up and remediate the site. This large civil engineering project will last a number of years. Phase I of the site investigation programme is currently underway; this will allow the EPA to gather further data on the site and contribute to the planning of the remediation. The EPA is committed to an open communication policy on the remediation project and continues to publish regular community updates.

The EPA will continue to use its regulatory powers to tackle environmental offences. Enforcement actions coordinated by the EPA's Office of Environmental Enforcement saw, for example, the number of unauthorised car scrapyards fall from 157 to 20 last year.

In terms of enforcing licences issued by the EPA, 658 inspections and 169 audits were carried out at EPA licensed waste and IPPC sites during 2011. Prosecution is an important part of environmental law enforcement and in 2011 the EPA took 23 prosecutions in the District Courts, 22 of which were successful. There were no new cases taken on indictment in 2011.

Finally

Last year also saw the departure of Director General, Mary Kelly, to take on the role of Chair of An Bord Pleanála. Dr Kelly was Director General of the EPA since 2002 and led the EPA effectively through profound change in that time. Under her leadership, the Agency was widely acknowledged as an exemplar of public sector effectiveness, and seen as the champion and independent voice for the environment in Ireland.

As the new Director General, I will, with my staff, continue to champion the environment, and ensure that science is the backbone of all of our activities. We would like to see all sectors integrate good environmental approaches into normal working practices. To this end the EPA will engage more broadly with sectors interacting with the environment and continue to develop our role in assisting development that is environmentally and economically sustainable. I am confident that by continuing to work with the commitment, dedication and flexibility that have become hallmarks of the EPA we will meet all of the challenges we face. The Agency has a vital role to play in ensuring the sustainable development of Ireland, as spelled out so clearly and simply last year by President Mary McAleese during a visit to EPA Headquarters:

“Thanks to the work of the EPA we know and accept that, as a society, we all have a collective responsibility to ensure that the future development of our economy is proofed so as to contribute to the sustainability of the environment in which we live and work.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laura Burke', followed by a period.

Laura Burke
Director General