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Dr Jeanne Moore
National Economic and Social Council
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Re: Shared Island Consultation: Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities

Dear Jeanne

Please find enclosed the EPA submission in relation to NESC's Shared Island Consultation on Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities.

The EPA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to this important topic and in the following pages makes some specific comments.

We welcome the reference to EPA's 'Ireland's Environment - An Integrated Assessment 2020' throughout and propose additional areas for enhanced collaboration and cooperation.

Please do not hesitate to come back to the Agency if further detail or clarification is required on any aspect of this submission.

Yours sincerely

Dr Eimear Cotter
Director of the Office of Environmental Sustainability

Shared Island Consultation: Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities

EPA Submission in response to NESC Consultation Paper

NESC's Consultation Paper on 'Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities' forms a strong basis for wider dialogue and engagement on the all-island dimensions of climate and biodiversity. The focus of the paper is on issues related to climate change and biodiversity loss and in this context the EPA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this work.

Given our shared geography and climate, both Ireland and Northern Ireland face similar challenges in relation to environmental protection and, in particular, climate mitigation, adaptation and protection of biodiversity. There is on-going collaboration and engagement between the EPA and counterparts in Northern Ireland on these matters including via the '5 Agencies' network with environmental authorities in Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland. The EPA is supportive of strengthening this cooperation to share knowledge, learnings and best practice to develop integrated and collaborative solutions to enhance and protect the environment.

In 2020, the EPA published 'Ireland's Environment - An Integrated Assessment 2020' which provides an assessment of the overall quality of Ireland's environment, the pressures being placed on it and the societal responses to current and emerging environmental issues. The assessment finds that the overall quality of Ireland's environment is not what it should be, and the outlook is not optimistic unless we accelerate action. 'Ireland's Environment - An Integrated Assessment 2020' identified the need for an overarching environmental policy position that integrates and delivers across multiple related strategies, plans and programmes. This recognises that environmental issues and challenges such as climate change, air quality, water quality and biodiversity cannot be looked at in isolation as they are complex, interconnected and need to be tackled in an integrated way.

According to NESC, the environmental policy landscape in Northern Ireland is shifting and a more holistic approach may also emerge there. There will be opportunities to share data, assessments and knowledge across both jurisdictions in any move towards an holistic approach to environmental protection. In this regard, the EPA concurs with NESC's observation that there will be potential to further explore areas of synergy and divergence between the recent State of the Environment report from the EPA and the Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report from DAERA.

Greenhouse gas emissions

The Paris Agreement represents a common framework for delivering climate action in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In terms of greenhouse gas emissions, the scale and profile of emissions North and South are similar which provides a good basis for developing mitigation solutions that work in both jurisdictions. Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions are approximately one third of those in Ireland. In 2019, 59.9 Mtonnes of CO_2eq[1] of greenhouse gas emissions were released in Ireland compared with 19.4 Mtonnes of CO_2eq in Northern Ireland in 2018[2].

Furthermore, the profile and sectoral contribution is similar across both jurisdictions and in particular in relation to the agriculture sector. Agriculture accounted for 35.3% of Ireland's greenhouse emissions in 2019 compared with 27% in Northern Ireland in 2018. This high contribution from agriculture sets the island of Ireland apart from others, for example in the EU, where typically agriculture accounts for ~10% of greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the EPA agrees that there is scope for increased cooperation and joint research programmes, North and South, particularly in the agriculture sector given this shared challenge. In the short-term, the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) to be held in Glasgow in 2021 may provide opportunities for collaboration.

Climate adaptation

Given our shared geography and climatic influences, certain impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events, will be felt on an all-island basis. Indeed, climate adaptation cooperation is being progressed through the British-Irish Council (BIC) to foster cooperation and shared learning on measuring and reducing climate risks to critical infrastructure across the BIC region.

In addition, a supporting objective of Ireland's National Adaptation Framework (2018) is to avail of opportunities to collaborate with other jurisdictions to tackle common challenges on adaptation and resilience and to consider transboundary impacts and synergies. Similarly, the Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme 2019-2024 notes the opportunities for collaboration on an all island basis. The EPA recommends using these existing frameworks and mechanisms to explore further knowledge sharing particularly in relation to research, mobilising finance, working in partnership with the private sector, local government, communities and civil society.

The EPA also sees opportunities for sharing information and knowledge on robust governance and effective collaboration between a wide range of actors which is required in effective climate adaptation planning. Ireland's Climate Information Platform, Climate

[1] http://www.epa.ie/ghg/
[2] https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-greenhouse-gas-inventory

Ireland, which is funded by the EPA on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, is an important resource in this regard.

Research & Development

Environmental research has a strong all-island dimension and provides rich opportunities for further deepening cooperation and developing solutions to common environmental challenges. The EPA's environmental research programme takes an all-island perspective and is supported by representatives from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). In the last 14 years, EPA has funded €5.5m worth of projects led by Queens University and the University of Ulster. This does not include the many other research projects where Northern Ireland researchers participate in consortia led by others.

The EPA also engages with counterparts in Northern Ireland on strategic direction of its research programmes. In particular, a new EPA Research Planning Framework to 2030, to be launched in 2021, was developed in consultation with NIEA colleagues. In addition, EPA collaborates with NIEA colleagues in relation to the 5 Agencies ShARE activity which is a collaborative forum for identifying and progressing shared knowledge needs between environment agencies of Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Ireland. Its focus is typically on policy implementation and regulatory challenges with the outputs being directly actionable[3]. Using such existing structures to enhance collaboration will be important in the context of shared island dialogue and discussions.

As part of Brexit, the UK have secured ongoing access to EU research funding opportunities. It would be considered a strength to present all-island project applications where co-benefit opportunities exist. Such opportunities must be actively mapped and supported by the respective research coordination agencies North and South acting in partnership.

A specific example of joint research relates to the EPA funded Transboundary Adaptation Learning Exchange (TalX) research project which commenced in January 2020. TalX represents an example of collaboration between Ireland's Climate Information Platform, Climate Ireland and the Climate Northern Ireland network. TalX aims to establish an innovative, collaborative and learning network to develop transferable skills and enabling solutions for adaptation. The project will explore best practice in terms of the structures and processes which empower national, sectoral and local decision makers to address the objectives of national and international climate adaptation policy. Five case study jurisdictions (Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England) will participate in the network, all of which are subject to a similar range of climate impacts but are at different stages of maturity in adaptation planning and implementation.

Brexit

[3] https://www.sepa.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/our-research/five-agencies-share-programme/

Following Brexit, there are a range of environmental challenges and issues to be addressed on an all-island basis. Key cross-border risks include water quality, waste management and nature protection. Environmental governance may be impacted and the implications for environmental protection on an all-island basis are uncertain. In this context it is imperative that organisations such as the EPA and counterparts in Northern Ireland continue to cooperate and work together for effective environmental decision-making post-Brexit.

Water Quality

Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have finalised their respective 'Significant Water Management Issues' (SWMI) assessments and are currently preparing the third cycle River Basin Management Plans. There are opportunities to continue to share information and knowledge to address common challenges in relation to water quality.

NESC Questions

In response to specific questions raised by NESC, the EPA provides the following responses.

(i) Is there one of the 5 areas identified which should be prioritised for more detailed consideration in a shared island context? If so, which one and why?

Although all five areas offer opportunities for enhanced cooperation and collaboration on an all-island basis, focusing on 'Valuing Nature' may provide significant co-benefits that also address climate, resilient cities and improved water quality.

The island of Ireland is one biogeographical unit and 'valuing nature' may be less complex economically, structurally and legally as an initial focus area. In terms of co-benefits, addressing biodiversity and ecosystem protection can deliver climate adaptation and mitigation benefits. It can also assist in the delivery of resilient cities where there are co-benefits with regard to water quality and public health. These multiple co-benefits could leverage a high degree of public and social engagement in collective actions under the banner of 'Valuing Nature'. Examples to be built on include the All Island Pollinator Plan and the all-island biodiversity data and assessment services of the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC).

(ii) Is there another area not listed in the 5 identified areas that should be considered for further exploration on a shared island basis? If so, what is it and why?

Focusing, in particular, on climate and biodiversity, the EPA suggests that the following additional areas are worthy of exploration on a shared island basis:

- environmental assessments;
- soil protection (supports both biodiversity, agriculture and climate aspects of the 5 action areas); and

- land-cover and land-use mapping

Given our single biogeographical territory (including the extensive marine territory) a shared island approach to environmental assessments could be considered including the application of earth observations and transnational monitoring infrastructure such as Copernicus, the Ecosystem Monitoring Network (under CLRTAP), the Integrated Carbon Observation System (ICOS) and the European Monitoring and Evaluation Programme (EMEP). In addition, the ecological and climate Sustainable Development Goals could be considered on a shared island basis.

(iii) Are there any points of clarification required in this paper or new issues which should be considered in relation to climate and biodiversity in a shared island context?

As noted above, environmental research has a strong all-island dimension and provides significant opportunities for cooperation and developing solutions to common environmental challenges. The report could benefit from highlighting these opportunities more explicitly.

Focusing on climate action as part of a 'green' recovery offers the opportunity to rebuild the all of island economy, generate new jobs and respond to climate change. A mobile and upskilled workforce with skills and knowledge targeted to the green economy can support a shared island transition and positioning as a market leader.

The market opportunities presented by the efficient use of resources and the global move to the circular economy as a climate action should be explored on a shared island basis; to seek to optimise the available resources for reuse, recycling and recovery and associated markets.