

Foreword



This is the seventh state of the environment report published by the EPA since its first such report in 1995. These reports are important milestones for Ireland, as they provide a snapshot of the environment at a particular point, as well as showing trends and changes in the environment over time. The reports assess progress in meeting the main environmental challenges facing the country and evaluates how national policies are being implemented and if they are operating and delivering as intended. The evidence base and assessments provided by our State of Environment reports facilitate policymakers and decision-makers across all sectors of the economy to review developments in their areas, so that changes to their policies and approaches can be taken to address the main environmental priorities for Ireland in 2020.

This latest assessment indicates that the overall quality of Ireland's environment is not what it should be, and the outlook is not optimistic unless we accelerate the implementation of solutions across all sectors and society. The environmental challenges that Ireland faces are giving rise to complex and systemic issues. They cut across different environmental topics, such as climate, air, soil, water, biodiversity and waste, and across organisations and sectors, business and all levels of society.

Ireland is already losing much of what is important in its environment. Unspoilt areas are being squeezed out and we are losing our pristine waters and the habitats that provide vital spaces for biodiversity. Climate change, and the disruption that will flow from it, is impacting the established economic, social and natural structures of our world. We seem unable to stem the tide of nature's destruction and may not fully understand its full impact until it is too late.

Protection of our waters, air, soil, ecosystems is essential as these systems and species provide vital supporting services for our wellbeing and our economy. While there are many national plans and programmes in place that address individual environmental challenges, they suffer from a coherence challenge, as they are devised in the absence of a single, overarching framework. Modern environmental problems are complex and cross-cutting and need to be tackled in an integrated way. However, nationally we tend to examine separately how different parts of the environment function.

A key message from our assessment is that Ireland needs an overall integrated national environmental policy position, or it risks existing environmental protection measures failing or competing with each other. Such a policy position could set out an ambition for protecting Ireland's environment in the short, medium and long-term with the aim of having a clean, healthy environment, that is valued and protected by all. It should be a national vision to which all government departments, agencies, businesses, communities and individuals can sign up to play their part in protecting our environment.

In addition to such a policy position, our report also calls for better implementation and delivery of existing legislation and policies. There are many plans and programmes already in place for many areas, which, if fully implemented, would go a long way towards resolving persistent environmental issues. Full implementation of, and compliance with, legislation is a must to protect the environment.

While overall many of the national environmental indicators are going in the wrong direction this does mask good actions at local level in many areas. There are notable positives too in the report that point towards what can be achieved. Landfill operation has improved dramatically; integrated industrial regulation is highly successful; there has been an expansion in recent years of Ireland's renewable energy share; we have a well-funded and active environmental research programme; the integrity and monitoring of drinking water supplies has improved; national monitoring programmes for air and water have been greatly enhanced; and we are consistently amongst the top-performing EU states for reporting on environmental data.

Our report also attests to a greater awareness about the positive benefits of a clean environment for health and wellbeing. Notwithstanding the difficulties people face during the on-going COVID-19 crisis that began in March 2020, we live in a time when there is societal momentum for change. The crisis has led many of us to redefine what we truly value and has shown us the importance of the natural environment in our local areas. We all expect, and rightfully so, that the air we breathe is clean, that the water we drink is safe, and that when we go to the beach that the bathing waters we swim in are not polluted. Now more than ever, Ireland's green and blue spaces, which include urban parks, coasts, lakes and rivers, forests and bogs, are regarded as essential components of Ireland's health infrastructure. These blue and green spaces allow people to get out in nature and away from the everyday stresses to the benefit of our health and well-being and therefore they need to be clean and protected.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Ireland's economy; the degree to which this impact will impede national environmental policy ambitions – including the transition to a climate-neutral economy – remains to be seen. It is imperative as we emerge from the pandemic crisis and look to stimulate economic recovery that we do so through a 'green investment' lens and so avoid spend that locks us into carbon intensive and otherwise unsustainable consumption and production patterns. Investment in a green recovery is rational and will yield substantial economic returns and outperform its less green counterparts on a number of important policy metrics. It can also provide the opportunity to deliver health and wellbeing co-benefits that will support resilience and recovery.

This report provides the public, policymakers, non-governmental organisations, community groups, businesses and others with the evidence base to help them make informed decisions about what they can do to help protect and improve our natural environment. I hope that you find the report valuable and informative and that it can help you play your part in this important endeavour.

Laura Burke

Director General

November 2020