

Agriculture Water Quality Working Group

Terms of Reference, Agreed 29/06/23

Purpose

Safe, healthy and well protected water is a key indicator of sustainability. It is imperative for our agricultural sector that we maintain and improve Irish water quality. Achievement of good water quality is a regulatory requirement under both the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the Nitrates Directive. It is also a market expectation.

The introduction of the Nitrates Action Programme has improved Irish water quality, however over the last decade our water quality has declined. Agricultural pressures have contributed to this decline, and given land use, agriculture is the most frequent significant pressure on water quality. These negative trends threaten Ireland's Nitrates Derogation post-2025. Without major interventions, Ireland will not achieve its WFD targets as required by 2027.

To address these challenges, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has proposed establishment of an all industry "Agriculture Water Quality Working Group". To actively engage in an intensive work package aimed at identifying and committing to demonstrative actions that will support Ireland's delivery of improved water quality and minimise the impact of agriculture on water quality. With a view to retaining the maximum possible stocking rate for Irish farmers commensurate with good water quality and contributing to the potential securing of Ireland's Nitrates Derogation in the long-term.

Remit

The objective of the Group is to seek additional buy-in, to raise awareness of existing measures and bring forward additional suggestions and measures to protect water and drive improvements in water quality to minimise agriculture's impact on water quality and demonstrate how the agriculture sector will actively protect good water quality. The Group will also contribute to the development of proposals that will assist with the effort to secure Ireland's Nitrates Derogation in the long-term.

Deliverables

To produce and secure industry support for a detailed plan and recommendations to reverse current negative trends and reduce pressures from Irish Agriculture. This plan and the associated recommendations will be broken down into actions needed as part to the current Interim Review of the NAP and actions required over the longer-term.

In devising its plan and recommendations, the Group is requested to consider the following objectives:

- To develop strategies to ensure full compliance with existing measures in the NAP.
- To increase awareness of water quality trends and how it impacts on a national derogation.
- To identify mitigation measures and supports that the farming sector and broader industry can engage with to further reduce nutrient losses and to minimise the impact of agriculture on water quality. To consider additional actions and how industry can support water quality objectives.

The Group may add further objectives to this list as appropriate.

Reporting

The Group will formally report to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage through the Nitrates Expert Steering Group as required.

Governance

The Agriculture Water Quality Working Group will be chaired by a representative from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine.

Secretariat will be provided by the Nitrates and Biodiversity Division within the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine.

Documentation circulated and discussions at meetings will be confidential to facilitate an open dialogue.

Membership

Invitations to participate in the Agriculture Water Quality Working Group will be issued by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Given this is intended to be an active working group, personal invitations have been issued to representatives from the relevant stakeholders as set out in Annex I.

The Agriculture Water Quality Working Group may invite and accept submissions from other interested bodies and will seek such expert advice as it considers appropriate.

Annex 1

Agriculture Water Quality Working Group membership.

Farming organisations

IFA

ICMSA

MACRA

ICSA

INHFA

Irish Grain Growers

Industry

ICOS

ACORN Group of private merchants

Dairy Industry Ireland

Meat Industry Ireland

State Agencies

Teagasc

Government Departments

DAFM

DHLGH

Other stakeholders

ACA

LAWPRO

An Forum Uisce