

FOREWORD

This fourth EPA state of environment report provides an integrated 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.

State of environment reports not only give a snapshot of the environment at a particular time, but also allow trends and changes in the environment to be tracked from one report to the next; progress in meeting the main environmental challenges to be evaluated; and an assessment of whether national policies are being implemented and working as intended. They allow policy makers and others to assess progress in key areas and provide evidence based analysis so that changes to existing policies can be made if necessary, or new policies brought forward.

Since the previous report in 2004, Ireland has experienced significant economic and population growth, which has in many cases caused an intensification of pressures on the environment. Despite this, Ireland's environment is still generally of a high quality overall, although there is no room for complacency. In the period since the last report, the global issues of climate change and biodiversity loss have come into much sharper focus both at international and national levels. Serious individual environmental problems have also arisen in the past number of years, for example in relation to the contamination of drinking water supplies, and pollution arising from waste water discharges. There have been increasing concerns over the potential impacts of historically contaminated sites.

There have also been some positive signals for the environment in the past number of years. The EU emissions trading scheme was successfully implemented in Ireland and is making an impact in tackling greenhouse gas emissions for the major producers. Emissions to air of sulphur dioxide, volatile organic compounds and ammonia have been successfully reduced in line with Ireland's international commitments, while producer responsibility initiatives for waste electrical and electronic equipment and for packaging waste have been very successful in tackling these priority waste streams. Increased investment in the provision of upgraded and new wastewater treatment infrastructure has resulted in some improvements in the quality of Irish surface waters, although much still remains to be done in this regard. There have also been a number of welcome policy developments at EU and national level. These relate mainly to climate change, air quality and air emissions, environmental noise, bathing water, chemicals in the environment and waste management. However, many of these have yet to be fully implemented in Ireland and resultant benefits to the environment have yet to be wholly realised.

The publication of this state of the environment report comes at a time when Ireland is facing difficult economic challenges. Nonetheless, within the context of sustainable development, economic well-being is intrinsically linked to protecting the environment and it is vital at this time not to lose sight of the environmental priorities. The environment is a key strategic

resource and asset for Ireland, and should be protected and managed to ensure that it continues as the basis for a healthy society and a strong economy into the future.

Environmental issues can no longer be considered in isolation, and the impact of human activities on the environment is increasingly being recognised. Social and economic drivers such as population growth, economic activity and consumption patterns place pressures on the environment, and these pressures must be managed and controlled in order to minimise their environmental impacts and to avoid serious environmental damage.

Despite successes to date however, much more focus and progress is needed to address the pressing environmental challenges that this report has identified for Ireland in the coming years. Chief among these challenges is limiting and adapting to climate change. The potential for catastrophic climate change is now acknowledged as one of the most serious threats facing humanity. Responsibility for dealing with that threat falls to this generation and fundamental and far-reaching structural and lifestyle changes are required if we are to avoid the worst consequences. Other important challenges for Ireland include reversing environmental degradation, especially in relation to water pollution, loss of habitats and species and in the remediation of contaminated land; mainstreaming of environmental considerations across all sector of the economy; and complying with environmental legislation and agreements.

The time for action is now if we are to successfully tackle these challenges so that Ireland can ensure a clean and healthy environment into the future.

In previous state of the environment reports there was limited capacity to assess how socioeconomic projections or new developments might impact on future environmental quality. To bridge that gap the EPA initiated a research project jointly with the Economic and Social Research Institute. In the same way that economists forecast macroeconomic indicators, such as GNP growth, unemployment, and inflation, the objective of the research is to produce forecasts of environmental pollutants and waste generation and to develop scenarios to better inform decision and policy making. Though the research is not complete, it is sufficiently advanced to allow some preliminary analysis in this report. Future state of environment reports will include further projections and scenario analyses.

Finally, clear, accurate and timely information is vital in raising awareness among the public and among key policy and decision makers and this report is a critical part of the process. A report of this nature would not be possible without the information provided through the expertise of the many people involved at local and national levels in the monitoring, research and assessment of Ireland's environment. I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to all those concerned.

Dr Mary Kelly *Director General*
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