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Foreword



This is the eighth State of the Environment Report from the EPA, marking nearly three decades of rigorous assessment. Each report spans 4 years, delivering the single most definitive evaluation of Ireland's environment – our air, waters, soil, biodiversity – and how our society impacts on it.

I urge you to read this report: this is your country, your environment, and safeguarding it is not optional – it is essential. The protection of our environment is critical to our health and wellbeing, and is core to our economic success and the safety and prosperity of generations to come. Our shared future depends on the shared actions we take now. Ireland's environment is priceless, and when we harm it, we jeopardise our societal progress and the very resources upon which we all depend. What this report outlines, in stark detail, is that collectively we need to make transformational change to shift our society to a sustainable trajectory. The need for this change – and the urgency of that need – cannot be overstated.

In the 50 years that we have been members of the European Union, Ireland has been transformed. We now look back to a time when we had serious industrial pollution of our rivers, when we relied on over a hundred municipal dumps, when we burned smoky fuel in our cities – and we can never go back to that. The quality of our lives has been dramatically enhanced with far greater numbers of people living substantially longer lives, far greater numbers in high-quality and rewarding employment, and far greater numbers taking part in healthy outdoor leisure activities. We have made immense progress as a nation. But what we may not recognise sufficiently – if we make the connection at all – is how much of this progress absolutely depends on the quality of our environment. We must ensure that the natural resources and environmental conditions

essential to the economy and to social wellbeing of Ireland are protected, or we risk undoing so much of our socioeconomic progress to date.

Our membership of the EU has been critically important in safeguarding our environment. Environmental legislation in Ireland, mostly derived from EU law, regulates key dimensions such as waste management, nature protection, chemicals, air quality, the environmental effects of agriculture and industry, and pollution of our waterways. The extensive monitoring systems we now have allow for a much better understanding of the complex issues facing us. Without this legislation and understanding, there is no question that Ireland's environment would be substantially more degraded than it currently is.

EU membership has helped us get to where we now are. But where we now are, while better on some fronts, is nowhere near good enough. We need to take a major step towards a better environment to secure our future health, wellbeing, and economic prosperity. This is not just about meeting rules and regulations, or just about targets. This report is about Ireland's environment, but it is also more than that: it is about the most important issue facing the future viability of our society and it demands a transformational leap in our environmental performance for ourselves, for our health and for our economy.

We now need a vision for our environment, so that our environmental performance matches our economic performance. But first, we need to acknowledge that the very lives we aspire to – healthy lives for ourselves and our families – the homes we live in, the jobs we do, the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the nature we walk and run through, swim and cycle in all depend on the quality of our environment, the very environment that we continue to damage year on year.

In Chapter 17, we have an Environmental Scorecard for Ireland – our grades on five key environmental themes: Climate, Air Quality, Nature, Water and Waste. Across all five headings our scores range from Moderate to Poor and Very Poor. The scorecard indicates that we are not making the progress needed. We have seen where concerted effort can deliver results as shown by the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, which were at their lowest level in 30 years in 2023. This positive achievement must be followed, year on year, by similar progress. We must now make good on all of our international commitments. That is only a minimum requirement but would still go some way towards putting us on a sustainable path.