

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.

We can of course take pride in all we have achieved, at both the policy and systemic levels, and all the positive changes people have made and continue to make in their lives. But we must also recognise that what we are doing is not enough. We now have cleaner air in our cities, but we have increasing evidence that even low levels of air pollution harm our health. We have addressed serious pollution in our rivers, but many of our best water bodies have lost their pristine status. We recycle more, but we also generate more waste overall, much of which is exported. We are taking individual positive actions across multiple fronts, but they are not keeping pace with the growing pressures, and the environment is being squeezed. In many areas, such as biodiversity and water quality, we are not halting environmental decline.

In short – we must do better. Vastly better. For too long we have merely aimed to ‘get by’, aspiring to only minimum standards, and in many instances, not even reaching those. Our policy responses to date have been insufficient to halt the decline in our environment. We have made progress in some areas, but the scale and the speed of it has been too small and too slow. The responsibility for protecting and managing our environment is a shared responsibility that involves government departments, industry, and all citizens of Ireland. Businesses, industry, landowners and members of the public all have an essential role to play.

Ireland has set a national objective to transition by 2050 to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy. Achieving this multifaceted objective will be the most complex and interconnected societal challenge for the next 25 years, and each step towards its achievement will present opportunities and challenges. Efficiencies will not get us there. Incrementalism will not get us there. Collectively we must shift our society to a sustainable trajectory.

In this report, we set out five priorities, which, if acted upon, would move us in the right direction, namely:

- We urgently need to have a national policy position on the environment to align our actions.
- We must rigorously implement existing environmental plans and programmes and comply with environmental law.
- We need to transform our energy, transport, food and industrial systems to achieve climate neutrality and drive down pollution.
- We must scale up investment in water, energy, transport and waste management infrastructure.
- We must protect our environment to protect our health.

We can no longer put off these changes and the urgency cannot be overstated. It will not get easier or cheaper, and year on year the need will become even greater. The environment underpins every sector of the economy and every aspect of our lives, our health and our wellbeing. Delaying now will further degrade our precious environment. We must transform, not to meet some targets or some deadlines, but because it is the right thing to do, for our environment, for our economy, and above all, for the health and wellbeing of ourselves and our families, now and into the future. Every change that we put off making now becomes harder next year, and more costly to achieve.

The Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made it clear: there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all. We, in Ireland, must do our part in making this sustainable future a reality.

Clear, accurate and timely information is vital to raising awareness among the public and those responsible for policy and for making critical decisions. I extend my deepest thanks and appreciation to all those who contributed to this report. With their help, I sincerely hope that this stock-take of the Irish environment serves as a stark reminder: preserving our environment is not a ‘nice-to-have’ – it is an act of self-preservation. The time for half measures is over. It is our responsibility to act decisively and ambitiously, for if we fail, we risk leaving behind a legacy of irreversible damage and lost opportunities. We must choose a future where Ireland thrives.

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