

Press release

Agriculture Water Quality Working Group meets

From [Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine \(/en/organisation/department-of-agriculture-food-and-the-marine/\)](#).

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On the request of Minister McConalogue, the newly established all-of-industry Agriculture Water Quality Working Group had its first meeting on Monday 29 May in Portlaoise.

Chaired by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, the working group includes representatives of the farm organisations, the agri-food industry, Teagasc, private agricultural consultants, Local Authorities, An Fóram Uisce and officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as well as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The aim of the working group is to identify and commit to demonstrative actions that will facilitate the agricultural sector contribute to improved water quality.

The group acknowledged the significant efforts and investments made to date, by farmers and the agri-food industry in the implementation of regulatory (Nitrates Regulations) and voluntary measures (e.g, the Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) and Co-op Sustainability Schemes) aimed at reducing the loss of nutrients from farms.

It was also acknowledged that efforts made by many farmers to date should be recognised and where appropriate showcased. Whereas, for those who undermine these efforts through breaches of the regulations, there should be enhanced enforcement activity.

Following this first meeting, Minister McConalogue said:

FOLLOWING THIS FIRST MEETING, MINISTER MCCONALOGUE SAID.

“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. The collective engagement, ambition and commitment demonstrated by leading stakeholders from across the Agri-Food Sector on this working group, is a pivotal action that we wish to use to facilitate a reverse in recent negative water quality trends with a view to seeking to secure our Nitrates Derogation in the longer term.”

An interim review of the current Nitrates Action Programme is required this year. Based on updated water quality data, this review will consider the effectiveness of existing, and the requirement for new, measures. The review is led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and guided by the Nitrates Expert Steering Group.

Notes

Nitrates Regulations

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) are the lead government department in relation to the Nitrates Regulations. These are formally referred to as the European Union Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters Regulations 2022 (as amended).

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine works closely with the DHLGH, by providing responsibility for implementation and operation of the Nitrates Derogation.

Nitrates Derogation

The Nitrates Derogation allows farmers to exceed the normal limit of 170 kg of livestock manure nitrogen per hectare set down in the Nitrates Regulations, and to farm at a level up to a maximum of 250 kg livestock manure nitrogen per hectare, subject to adherence to stricter rules.

Commission Implementing Decision

In awarding Ireland its current Nitrates Derogation, the European Commission imposed conditionality around water quality trends. Their Implementing Decision states that where water quality is poor, or where worsening trends occur over the period 2021-2022, the maximum livestock manure N/ha limit must be reduced from 250kg N/ha to 220kg N/ha from January 2024.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Charlie McConalogue, has committed to preparing a case to re-engage and seek flexibility on the timing of this review from the Commission with a view to giving existing measures more time to demonstrate their impact. However, there is no guarantee that there will be any change to the Commission's decision as it stands.

Nitrates Expert Steering Group

The Nitrates Expert Steering Group comprises of officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

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