

# Newsletter



An Fóram Uisce – looking after Ireland’s water resources

Issue 04 / Summer 2021



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## Peatlands Webinar

The Water Forum hosted its 2nd webinar on 21st May, on the topic of Managing Peatlands for Water Quality with co-benefits for Biodiversity and Climate Mitigation. Representatives from Bord na Mona, Government officials, Department of Environmental and Rural Affairs NI, Local Authorities, National Parks and Wildlife Service, academics and community representatives attended.

Minister Malcolm Noonan opened the webinar reiterating the aim of Ireland’s climate emergency declaration in 2015 to halt degradation of peatlands through sustainable management. He stated that we need to listen to communities and farmers to achieve vital restoration and

conservation measures and to deliver a just transition. EU policy demands strong targets for nature protection and Ireland’s Prioritised Action Framework for Nature will require €1.13 billion funding over 7 years to achieve EU Habitats and Birds Directives objectives.

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## Session 1

In Session 1, **Dr Flo Renou-Wilson** gave a brief introduction to peatlands noting they recorded Irish history going back to when the ice sheets were retreating 10,000 years ago. Peatlands cover 1/5 of Ireland forming raised bogs in the midlands and blanket bogs on higher ground. Only 18% of Ireland's bogs are at good conservation status, with the remaining 82% degraded. Degradation releases greenhouse gases, reduces biodiversity and pollutes rivers and streams. Rewetting the bog by blocking drains to keep the water table between 0 and -30cm below the surface will let the bog plants grow back, reduce biodiversity loss, improve water quality and stop carbon emissions.

**David Wilson** explained that peatlands are drained as a result of peat extraction, coniferous forest plantation and the creation of grassland on peat soils. Drainage allows oxygen flows into peat, microbes can then degrade the peat, releasing Greenhouse gasses in the process. Drained peatlands are the largest emitter of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions every year in Ireland.

In a business-as-usual scenario, rising temperature, wetter winters and drier summers will have big impacts on peatlands and carbon. As temperatures rise, moisture is removed from peat resulting in more losses of CO<sub>2</sub>, drier summer months will increase water drawdown and further increase CO<sub>2</sub> loss. Wildfires may become more common. We need to ensure peatlands are in good condition to make them more resilient to climate change. While rewetting can reduce GHG emissions and improve resilience, restoration is required to sequester carbon.

**Derek McLoughlin** of the Wild Atlantic Life Project, who has worked with farmers for over 20 years to protect habitats and water quality, noted



Minister Malcolm Noonan opening An Fóram Uisce Peatlands Webinar, 21st May 2021.

*“Currently, there is a serious leak in the bucket, we need to stop losing carbon, in 70% of peatlands in the west, carbon is being lost”.*

that what happens on the ground is driven by policy. Using a results-based approach farmers are guided to adapt agricultural practice on their farms to achieve higher ecological status for biodiversity, water quality and climate mitigation. A whole farm approach is used so that improvements can be made in all areas. Funding supports reward higher ecological ambitions. Implementation must be easy, and monitoring and evaluation must be captured. There needs to be investment in training and skills development of the farmers, support and advice is very important throughout the process. At a policy level, inter-department collaboration is essential. *“Currently, there is a serious leak in the bucket, we need to stop losing carbon, in 70% of peatlands in the west, carbon is being lost”.*

Question: Rather than produce non-profitable sheep or beef, should farmers become carbon farmers? Answer: That would be a very good aim. While not impossible, it is hard to quantify one field from another, need lots of data to

underpin the policy, with robust data it would be a logical win-win for everyone. Farmers would become stewards of the land.

## Session 2

Session 2 considered the **Cultural Ecosystem Services** provided by peatlands.

**Kate Flood's** research studies the social and cultural values of peatlands and how they provide us with health and wellbeing benefits. Social values and perspectives need to be included in peatland management plans and policy decisions and collaborations with stakeholders is needed to enable this. Understanding and integrating this human dimension will result in improved conservation, be more ecologically effective and socially just.

**Cultural ecosystem services** include recreation and ecotourism, education and knowledge, sense of place, cultural heritage, inspiration, aesthetic, and religious and spiritual aspects. They are what connects people with the



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landscape and provide the values and beliefs that impact on behaviour and acceptance of change. Community-based, multi-stakeholder approaches involving state, market, and civil society that explore community values and beliefs are key to promoting social and ecological well-being; and can result in an increase in the potential of cultural and habitat ecosystem services. **Meaningful engagement and participation, from early in the planning process, enables co-defining of the issue, co-designing the processes, co-creating the solution and co-delivering the actions.** Such deliberative processes will result in enduring solutions. Focusing on wellbeing is key to the transition and the identification of the values important to society. Public policy has a key role in promoting community and ecological wellbeing.

**Chris Uys**, is a volunteer with the community-based Abbeyleix bog project, a raised bog that was drained for peat extraction from the 1980s. The community took guardianship of the bog and have a 50-year lease agreement to manage it. A technical advisory group was identified to provide scientific advice and drain-blocking began in 2009. This work has had a huge impact on the quality of the habitats within the bog. Active raised bog increased by 12.5% and emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> diminished by half since then. Geographic Information Systems is used now to map at sub-metre resolution to give accurate information for future decision making. Community workshops, heritage events and bio-blitz recordings are held. Volunteers built a 1.7km bog bridge and 300m of boardwalk. While the primary objective is ecological health of the bog, arts linkages, further education, school projects, recreation and wellbeing are very important secondary objectives.



Birch Shield Bug on Field Scabious. Picture taken by Tina Claffey.

There has been an increase in use during Covid, with a daily record number of 680 visitors, resulting in local economic benefits. *“People want to connect to nature and the environment however, to get people to make a difference, they must be empowered to do so”.*

**Tina Claffey** shared some of her wonderful photographs of the bog habitats and species. Nothing could be more awe inspiring than the magnificent birch shield bug that seemed to mimic a very expensive piece of jewellery.

As Tom Collins concluded *“it is like a new dawn, we have been shown a new*

*way of being in the bog’ There is a danger that if we can’t do everything, we will not do anything. Bringing the science, community and arts together to introduce a new way and the new values of peatlands has been informative and inspiring. Thanks to all the speakers for their wisdom and insight.*

In response to the online poll, 66.3% people are optimistic that measures can be put in place to prevent further harm to peatlands.

The Webinar presentations are available to view on You Tube:

[Session 1](#)  
[Session 2](#)

# Catchment Management

Members of the Catchment Management Standing Committee have prepared a submission to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Agri-Food Strategy 2030 Consultation, which raised a number of key issues;

The Forum was of the view that the short time frame given to the **Public consultation**, along with the technical nature of the documentation did not facilitate meaningful public engagement.

Within the **Governance and Policy Coherence** arrangements the Forum recommends more transparent inter-departmental engagements particularly with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and consideration of the Framework for Integrated Land and Landscape Management (FILLM) approach to ensure focused and targeted actions across all EU Directives.

The primary focus of food production should be on environmentally premium products, where the competitive advantage is on clean food production, upholding Ireland's 'green reputation'. To support this, the principle of **public money for public good** would enable farmers to

transition from chemical-based agriculture to more environmentally sustainable agriculture as required by the EU Green Deal, thereby having the potential to benefit farmers economically while protecting and enhancing public goods such as air, water, soil and biodiversity.

The Forum recommends the inclusion of the Environment Protection Agency (EPA), DHLGH and Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) on the Environmental Sub-Group **monitoring implementation** as this would increase resources and expertise, improve transparency and support agriculture and foods 'green credentials'.

The key provision in the strategy for water quality should be to **protect all water bodies** not just high-status water bodies.

The Forum recommends that Goal 4 is expanded to include **agri-environment training, and re-skilling and education initiatives** to support the transition to sustainable farming. Training for farm advisors, consultants and those based in Teagasc, as a means of expanding the work of ASSAP in supporting farmers would be beneficial. Training on the EPA's Pollution Potential Impact maps



would also support land-use decisions making.

**Water conservation** should be an important consideration when aiming to "embed the agri-food sector in the circular economy", and there should be greater awareness of sustainable phosphorus management due to concerns over a future global supply shortage of recycled fertilisers to meet growing consumer food demand.

**A strategic environmental assessment (SEA)** will assess the proposed actions of the Strategy against a series of sustainability topics, which include air, climate, water, biodiversity, soil, health, and others. An Fóram would recommend the urgent development of an action plan to mitigate any environmental footprint identified in the SEA.

**Final Agri-food Strategy submission**

# Water Services and Research



An Early Career Research project was presented to the Water Services Committee on *How to Improve the Drinking Water Quality of Small Private Supplies in Ireland*, Ms Luisa Albuquerque de Andrade, Dr Jean O'Dwyer, and Dr Paul Dylan Hynds of the Technological University of Dublin.

Private water supplies provide drinking water to commercial/public properties who are not connected to the public

water mains. There are over 400 private group schemes set up by the local community, who manage the abstraction, treatment and distribution of treated water. 1,750 small private supplies serving commercial or public activity such as hotels, pubs and restaurants, crèches, nursing homes and national schools are registered with local authorities. There are approximately 180,000 private wells in the country with management is the



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responsibility of the owner. Collectively, one fifth of the people of Ireland get their water from these private supplies.

The comprehensive report found that Small Private Supplies consistently display lowest microbial and chemical quality relative to other drinking water supplies. Non-compliance in drinking water standards in these supplies are a result of **inappropriate source protection and management practices**. Many SPCs remain unregistered and unmonitored and there is inadequate advice and a lack of enforcement.

Included in the research recommendations are:

- 1) the establishment of a novel national organisation to manage issues related specifically to SPSs;
- 2) the establishment of a Register of Small Private Supplies;
- 3) the production of hot spot maps for naturally occurring groundwater contaminants;
- 4) the enforcement of source protection; and
- 5) better communications, training and well stewardship campaigns.

Report: **The Protection of Small Private Supplies in Ireland**

Policy Brief: **How to Improve Drinking Water Quality in Small Private Supplies**

## Education and Awareness



Mr Donal Purcell of An Fóram Uisce with the winners of the Water Matters Competition and their teacher Mrs Monahan of Naomh Erc National School, Ballyheigue, Co. Kerry.

### Education and Awareness

On World Earth Day, 23rd April, the winners of the schools Water Matters at Home competition were announced. The first prize in the Senior classes went to Naomh Erc National School in Ballyheigue, Co. Kerry who submitted an MP4 of a drama that illustrated the changes that had taken place in 50 years.

Oatlands National School in Stillorgan were the winners in the Junior section, so a big congratulations to them. The runners up were Danescastle National School, Carrig on Bannow, Wexford who were presented with their prize over zoom.

### Annual Report 2020

**Annual Report 2020** has been published and is available on the Forum's website.

## Members Area

The National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) Rural Water Week 2021 will kick off on the 6th of September this year, with a series of exciting events and engagements planned.

The Rural Water Webinar promises to be the highlight of the week. Taking place via Zoom across two

morning sessions on the 8th and 9th of September, it will feature presentations from a wide number of guest speakers. The webinar will also close with the announcement of the winners of the inaugural GWS Excellence Awards.

Stayed tuned to the **NFGWS website** and social media channels for more details.

