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Government of Ireland

Executive Summary: The Water Action Plan 2024

A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland

Prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

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Water quality is vital to the well-being of our society, economy and environment, particularly as our rivers and lakes are the sources of our drinking water. They are not only essential parts of our natural environment but also a treasured national asset that is the foundation for making our country a green and fertile land. By protecting our water quality, we will also help to protect public health. By improving our aquatic environment, we will help to sustain jobs in water-intensive sectors, such as agri-food and tourism, sectors that collectively sustain over 200,000 jobs. By preserving these waters, we will preserve our natural heritage for future generations.

The Water Action Plan 2024: A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland outlines the new approach that Ireland will take as it works to protect and restore its rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters over the third-cycle of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). Building on the lessons learned from the previous River Basin Management Plans, the approach under this Plan is to place Integrated Catchment Management at its centre. The new Plan uses a much-improved evidence base built upon the assessment of the two previous cycles, to underpin decision-making, at both national and local levels. This Plan will expand and build upon the lessons learned to form a stronger and more integrated approach to public consultation and engagement. The Government is introducing new initiatives and policies to address many of our water-quality challenges. The new Plan builds on the measures implemented during the first and second plans, and is not only a significant national commitment under the Programme for Government, but also on the international sphere by showing our commitment to the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 to improve water quality, protect and restore water-related ecosystems.

With effective implementation of the Plan, Ireland can expect to see actions to improve water quality in our water bodies. Changes in agricultural approaches and an increase in urban wastewater treatment will lead to reduced pollution pressures. The new structures and outcomes-based approach, combined with the development of capabilities and expertise, will lay the foundations for consistent progress to be made in addressing a long-term challenge faced by many developed economies.

Consequently, the Plan has placed a major emphasis on establishing the “right measure in the right place” through an effective catchment-based approach. Clear priorities are set out in the Plan, which will ensure that all stakeholders are working together with a strong focus on delivering positive outcomes.

Governance structures will be further developed and improved to facilitate any changes in direction to meet the challenges of improving our water quality. National authorities retain responsibility for the implementation of national programmes, with regional structures driving the implementation of prioritised supporting measures. Meaningful stakeholder and public engagement will be a significant feature of the Catchment Management Work Plans being established by The Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO), which will facilitate public and stakeholder engagement in water policy down to a community level. This engagement will still be supported through the catchments.ie and lawaters.ie websites — and by a wide range of other activities aimed at facilitating and encouraging engagement, while the introduction of a dedicated national campaign website will ensure that the transparent communication surrounding the Plan will reach a national and international audience.

Some of the most significant developments under this Plan include continued investment in wastewater infrastructure of over €2.3 billion over the period 2020 – 2024 by Uisce Éireann, including 108 wastewater treatment plants and 77 collection networks at an estimated cost of €1.5 billion, and 92 national programmes at an estimated cost of €780 million. New agri-environmental schemes under the CAP Strategic Plan (2023-2027) will invest €2.9 billion in environmental protection measures, also a Water European Innovation Partnership (EIP) project, with an investment of €60 million, has been specifically designed to implement water protection measures on 15,000 farms, while pressures on hydromorphology will be addressed through the establishment of a new national restoration programme to mitigate the negative impact of historical water barriers and improve the natural flow of our water bodies.

This Plan’s objectives are ambitious, which is reflected both in the level of commitment to and investment in existing measures and in the expectation that

supporting measures will be implemented to improve approximately 800 water bodies over the period of this cycle. This will result in significant improvements for approximately 150 - 300 water bodies to reach their status objectives, while a further 500 – 650 water bodies will have targeted measures at water body level which will result in improvements in specific water quality elements (e.g. reductions in pollutant levels). Combined with improved implementation and engagement structures, this should see progress in making water-quality improvements and in building capabilities, knowledge and expertise for the future.

This Executive Summary outlines the key aspects of the third-cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP). It provides:

- A brief introduction and background to the "*Water Action Plan 2024: A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland*.
- Details of the key findings of the most recent water-quality results and of the outcomes of the risk-characterisation process in terms of the share of total water bodies found to be at risk of not meeting the requirements of the Water Framework Directive (WFD).
- Summary information on the significant pressures causing risks to water bodies.
- Details of the environmental objectives of the WFD and of the priorities for the third planning cycle, given the scale of the challenge presented.
- An outline of the key existing and supporting measures (from our full Programme of Measures) aimed at meeting our environmental objectives.
- Descriptions of the Plan's implementation strategy, of the measures we are taking to expand and further develop communication and public and stakeholder engagement, and projected funding for the Programme of Measures.
- A summary of the expected outcomes, based on our proposed measures and implementation plans.

Introduction & Background

The Irish River Basin District (RBD) covers an area of 70,273km^2, with 46 catchment management units — consisting of 583 sub-catchments, with 4,842 water bodies. Key measures introduced in the second-cycle included scheduling improved wastewater treatment with over €1.7 billion being invested by Irish Water (*now Uisce* Éireann) in over 250 wastewater treatment projects between 2017 and 2021, the deployment of 43 local authority investigative assessment personnel to work in the Prioritised Areas for Action, a new collaborative Sustainability and Advisory Support Programme between Government and the dairy industry, consisting of 30 Sustainability Advisors promoting agricultural best practice in 190 Areas for Action, the implementation of a *'Blue Dot Catchments Programme*' for the protection of high status waters, the extension of the grant scheme for the repair, upgrade and replacement of domestic wastewater treatment systems, and the creation of the Community Water Development Fund to support community water initiatives.

The *Water Action Plan 2024: A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland* aims to build on the key lessons from the previous cycles, and the draft River Basin Management Plan public consultation process, and firmly integrate them into its development. These lessons have been considered in preparing the Programme of Measures. These measures address areas such as improved governance and implementation structures and an enhanced public participation element alongside the development of Sectoral Action Work Plans and Catchment Management Work Plans. They also address the significant pressures on our water bodies from the loss of nitrogen and phosphorous from agricultural practices, to the physical impacts (pressures on hydromorphology) from the past construction of weirs and dams, for example. Responses to these impacts include new measures such as a national scale Water European Innovation Partnership (EIP) project to target water pollution mitigation actions and a national restoration programme to mitigate the negative impacts of barriers on rivers.

We have also used three guiding principles in developing this finalised RBMP. Firstly, the development and implementation of this Plan requires effective and efficient national, regional and local structures, from high-level policy direction, oversight of implementation and technical implementation and reporting, down to regional implementation and the public participation structures. Secondly, the targets set in the Plan must be outcomes based and be ambitious but achievable. Thirdly, we must continue to ensure that effective national measures are in place to address pressures throughout our entire River Basin District, ensuring the implementation of "the right measures in the right place".

Water-Quality Status and trends

The Environmental Protection Agency assesses over 4,000 surface water bodies for ecological status and assesses 514 groundwater bodies for groundwater status. This monitoring programme is carried out over a 6-year period, with the most up-to-date information available from the 2016-2021 period.

Overall, 54% of surface waters are in good or high ecological status while the remaining 46% are in unsatisfactory ecological status. For groundwater

bodies, 91% are in good chemical and quantitative status.

A comparison of the changes in surface water status between the 2013-2018 assessment and the 2016-2021 assessment shows that while there have been improvements (443 water bodies) and declines (428 water bodies) in water quality across all classes, there has been little net change in status overall, and a slight net decline in the number of water bodies that are meeting their environmental objectives. Indeed, the percentage of water bodies meeting their environmental objectives has decreased in each subsequent assessment period since the first baseline water status assessment was undertaken in 2007-2009.

Risks to water bodies and the pressures responsible

The outcomes of the latest risk characterisation process by the EPA show that 1,963 out of 4,842 water bodies (41%) are within the '*Not At Risk*' category and meeting their environmental objective of good or high-status, with 1,649 (34%) of water bodies are classed as '*At Risk*' of not meeting their environmental objective of good or high-status, while 1,230 (25%) of water bodies are currently '*In Review*'.

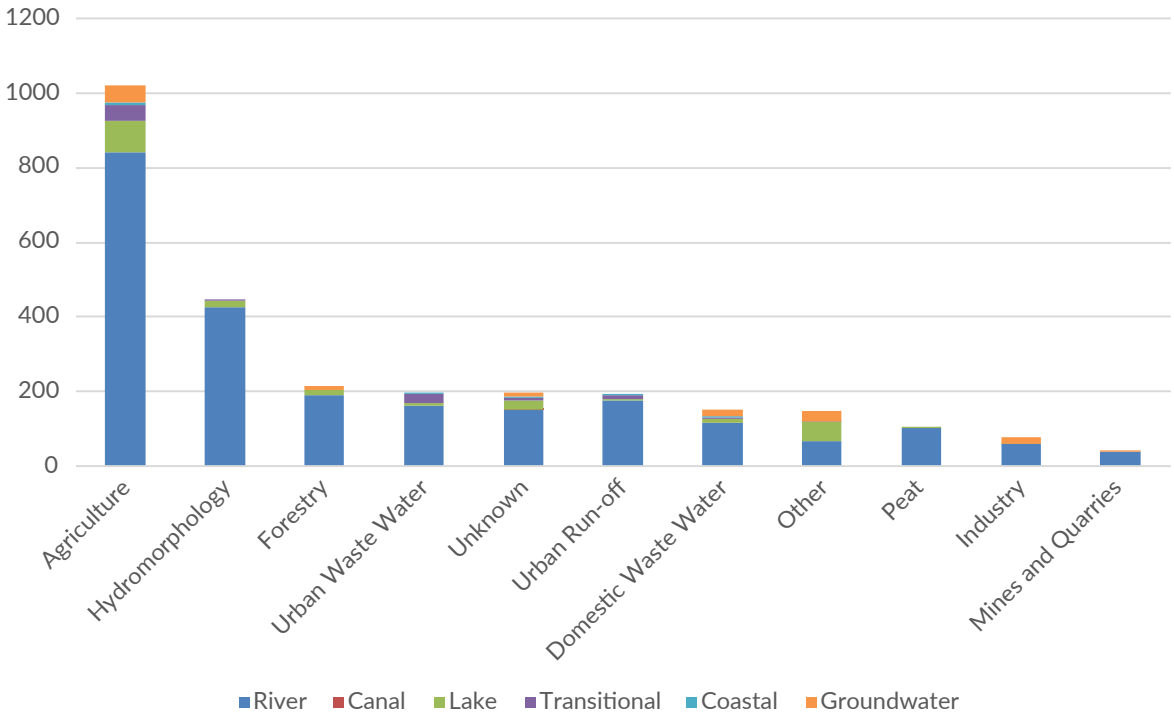
Having identified those water bodies at risk of not meeting their objectives, the characterisation process identifies the significant pressures causing this risk. The significant pressures impacting on the 1,649 water bodies that are at risk of not meeting their objectives include; Agriculture (1,023), Pressures on Hydromorphology (448), Urban Wastewater (197), Forestry (216), Domestic Wastewater (148), Urban Run-off (194) and Peat (106), Extractive Industry (79) and Mines and Quarries (40).

In contrast to the overall national trend, of the 500 river water bodies monitored in the designated Priority Areas for Action (PAAs) during 2019-2021, 314 remained stable with no change in ecological status. A total of 118 river water bodies showed improvements in status, while 68 declined, resulting in a net overall improvement in status class in 50 water bodies in the Priority Areas for Action. The net improvement in river water quality in PAAs is higher than the improvements seen nationally. This may indicate that when targeted action is taken, improvements in water quality can be achieved. Nevertheless, a large number of river water bodies are still declining and unless this is addressed, sustained and progressive improvements in water quality will be difficult to achieve.

Environmental Objectives and Priorities

In broad terms, the objectives of the Water Framework Directive are (i) to prevent the deterioration of water bodies and to protect, enhance and restore them with the aim of achieving at least good status and (ii) to achieve compliance with the water standards and objectives for designated protected areas.

Figure 1: Frequency of significant pressures on at-risk water bodies.



Although the objectives of the Directive clearly set out the end goals, the challenges presented in achieving these objectives are very significant. Therefore, a key purpose of this Plan is to identify priorities and ensure that implementation of the Plan is guided by these priorities. The following evidence-based priorities have been adopted for this river basin planning cycle:

- Ensure full compliance with relevant EU legislation.
- Prevent deterioration.
- Meet the water standards and objectives for designated protected areas.
- Protect high-status waters.
- Implement targeted actions and pilot schemes in focus sub-catchments aimed at (i) targeting water bodies close to meeting their objective and (ii) addressing more complex issues that will build knowledge for future cycles.

Programme of Measures — Summary of Key Measures

Management measures are required to protect and restore natural waters. These measures are many and diverse. They include the implementation of eleven existing EU Directives such as the Nitrates Directive and the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive. The Water Framework Directive also introduced new mandatory measures, including the control of water abstractions, the control of engineered alterations to natural waters (hydromorphological changes) and the protection of vulnerable catchments from which drinking water is sourced.

With regard to the implementation of regulatory regimes arising out of the existing EU Directives, continual efforts to secure full environmental compliance and to increase enforcement, where necessary, is essential. This is one of the key goals of the proposed 2022-2027 programme of measures. In addition, a number of new management regimes are in the process of being introduced to strengthen controls on water abstractions and engineered alterations to natural waters. The transposition of the new 2020 Drinking Water Directive has also provided the opportunity to implement a more comprehensive and robust approach to drinking water source protection.

In addition to the measures mentioned above a number of 'supplementary measures' have been put in place during the second river basin planning cycle. These were judged to be necessary to drive water quality improvements and protection in a coherent manner following extensive consultations. They included, for instance, new governance and implementation structures (such as LAWPRO and ASSAP), additional water protection measures under CAP, additional investment in public waste water infrastructure and the remediation of domestic waste water treatment systems. The supplementary measures also included further technical research and development to improve our knowledge and understanding of environmental pressures on water and how to address them effectively.

The characterisation process led by the EPA and supported by a broad range of stakeholders is particularly important for identifying the types and location of risk and impacts on waters. The recent technical advances mean that a more comprehensive, robust and streamlined management regime can now be designed and implemented. We have a clearer view of what mitigation measures are required and where those measures need to be implemented locally to improve the status of natural waters, in other words, 'putting the right measure in the right place'. The proposed new and enhanced measures contained in this plan reflect the additional measures considered necessary to deliver the objectives of the WFD in full and to contribute to other environmental priorities including biodiversity and climate mitigation and adaptation. In total, **517** areas have been selected for focused attention in the third-cycle based on risk.

LAWPRO will begin preparing 46 supplementary Catchment Management Work Plans. These will be further supported by the development of Sectoral Action Work Plans including in relation to agricultural, urban wastewater, pressures impacting hydromorphology and forestry pressures. Tracking of implementation, both protection and improvement actions, is central to this framework.

In line with the pressures identified through the characterisation process, and the priorities set out above, the following are the key measures aimed at moving towards meeting the environmental objectives of the WFD:

- The Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP) established during the second-cycle has been extended and expanded for the third-cycle. Based on an independent assessment of the ASSAP to date and its recommendations, a major European Innovation Partnership (EIP) project has been established by DAFM and DHLGH to support the targeting of the right measures in the right place. The Water EIP project led by LAWPRO, Teagasc and the dairy industry, is national in scale and is focused on reducing losses of phosphorus, nitrogen, sediment and, where relevant, pesticides to water from agricultural lands by promoting the adoption of innovative best

practice in nutrient management, the application of Nature based Natural Water Retention Measures (NWRM) and other suitable measures. The budget is €60 million (2023-2027).

- The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has collaborated with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Water and Heritage Divisions), the EPA and LAWPRO to design schemes under Pillars I and II of the CAP Strategic Plan (2023-2027) which will deliver significant benefits for water protection & restoration and biodiversity, as well as climate mitigation & adaptation.
- Schemes under the new CAP Strategic Plan contributing to improvements in water, biodiversity and climate objectives include the Eco-schemes (€1.4million), the ACRES Co-operation Projects scheme (€740 million) and the ACRES General scheme (€750 million).
- The Fifth Nitrates Action Programme (2022-2025) has been further strengthened. Enforcement will be enhanced to drive greater compliance. Additional farm inspection personnel will be recruited for this purpose.
- Pressures on Hydromorphology has been identified as a significant pressure impacting 448 water bodies at risk of failing to achieve their WFD objectives. They impact by causing damage to natural processes and to the structure and functions of habitats and species, e.g. barriers that impede fish migration, land and channel drainage that alters the physical habitat conditions and the flow conditions. These physical alterations are frequently linked to other significant pressures such as agriculture, forestry, peat extraction, mines and quarries. The following key new measures will be implemented to address existing and future pressures on the physical condition of waters;
  - » A National Restoration Programme is being established to mitigate the negative impact of past construction in or near water bodies. Inland Fisheries Ireland is establishing a newly resourced Barriers Mitigation Division from 2023 under the guidance of the National Hydromorphology Expert Group. The initial focus will be on barriers but will expand to other pressures on hydromorphology. A minimum investment of €110 million is anticipated.
  - » As part of the National Restoration Programme, the roadmap of actions to improve fish migration in the lower Shannon at the Hydroelectric scheme located around Parteen and Ardnacrusha is being progressed. Also, a pilot project is being undertaken for the Annacotty Weir in County Limerick to assist with the design and implementation of the national restoration programme.
  - » Controls on pressures that affect the physical condition of waters need to be strengthened in Ireland. A National Hydromorphology Programme is being established. The Programme will be supported by a Hydromorphology Expert Group and is intended to facilitate the implementation of Water Framework Directive (WFD) objectives relating to the control of pressures on hydromorphology.
- In total 216 water bodies are currently characterised as impacted by pressures from the forestry sector, either solely or alongside pressures from other sectors. These include the physical alteration to habitats, excessive nutrients and sediment and changes in water level and/or flow. Well sited and managed woodlands and forests can play in protecting and enhancing water quality, through the delivery of a range of water-related ecosystem services. Key measures for the third-cycle include;
  - » Continual improvements to the licence applications process for key forestry activities. For example, these include an increase the area of forests with appropriate water setbacks through the ongoing restructuring of existing forest stands at clearfell / reforestation stage.
  - » Promotion of support measures that have a clear role in relation to the protection of water, including: the Continuous Cover Forestry Scheme; the various native woodland and agro-forestry options under the Afforestation Scheme, the Native Woodland Conservation Scheme, and the Reforestation for Climate Resilience Scheme.
  - » Launch of the new Forests for Water scheme with added incentives to promote the creation of new native forests specifically to provide water services, including improvements to water quality, drinking water source protection, natural water retention, the improvement of aquatic and riparian habitats, and the expansion of alluvial woodland.
- Continued investment in wastewater infrastructure with Uisce Éireann investing over €2.3 billion over the period 2020-2024. This includes 108 wastewater treatment plants and 77 collection networks at an estimated cost of €1.5 billion and 92 national programmes at an estimated cost of €780 million. Investment needs beyond this period up to 2027 are currently being assessed and costed.
- A number of initiatives to address **Urban Runoff** will be implemented. These include; an implementation strategy and pilot for nature

based Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems on a national scale, guidance and specialist support, through LAWPRO, to the Local and Planning Authorities on measures to be implemented, research on protecting bathers' health and the preparation of integrated urban drainage management plans.

- In line with the programme for government commitment to 'continue to help fund upgrades to **domestic wastewater treatment systems**, DHLGH will continue to monitor the uptake of the new grant schemes to ensure adequate numbers of people are availing of this measure.
- For the purposes of improving the **protection of shellfish waters**, DHLGH will seek to implement a new legislative and management framework for shellfish waters in Ireland in collaboration with DAFM and other relevant agencies. This will include consideration of monitoring, assessment and protection measures.
- Activities in the area of the restoration and rehabilitation of damaged and degraded peatlands will be accelerated. Examples of key measures include; the National Peatlands Strategy is to be updated into a new Implementation Plan by NPWS. DAFM to oversee the implementation of sustainable management practices developed through peatland EIP projects within the ACRES Agri-environmental schemes. The continuation and expansion of NPWS national programme of peatland restoration on SAC and NHA raised bogs, blanket bogs and fens. Bord na Móna will operate the Enhanced Decommissioning Restoration and Rehabilitation Scheme (EDRRS).

Implementation Strategy

Our implementation strategy focuses on ensuring full implementation of the Programme of Measures over the lifetime of this Plan. The process of selecting the water bodies to be targeted for action through supporting measures was driven at regional and local level through local authority structures. The prioritisation of water bodies has taken place through the five regional committees, each chaired by a local authority Chief Executive. This prioritisation used the EPA catchment assessments as a starting point, with the prioritisation of areas and actions agreed with relevant stakeholders based on wider considerations of impacts and feasibility.

Learning from the lessons of previous cycles, the implementation structures will be re-focused to ensure effective and co-ordinated delivery of the measures. The Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC) provides high-level policy direction and oversight of implementation. The National Co-ordination and Management Committee (NCMC) has been set up under the WPAC to ensure that the measures necessary to achieve our objectives are implemented in an efficient, effective and co-ordinated way. The National Technical Implementation Group (NTIG) co-ordinates ongoing detailed tracking of implementation and provides a forum for knowledge sharing. Finally, the regional local authority structures, though the five regional committees, drive delivery of supporting measures at local level. This work is further supported by the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) and the Catchment Management Work Plans currently in development. In operating within these structures, all of the bodies associated with this Plan will endeavour to adopt an ethos of actively participating and working together to deliver real action and positive outcomes.

Communication and Public & Stakeholder Engagement

A clear message emerged from the public consultation processes was that the draft River Basin Management Plan lacked ambition and urgency to deal with issues raised. There was also a call for a more streamlined governance structure with clear actions and targeted measures and meaningful public engagement with regard to the implementation of the RBMP.

To help address these concerns a Programme Delivery Office will be created within the Water Division in DHLGH, which will oversee the implementation of the Programme of Measures, and which will allow for more effective communication across the different governance structures. A central aspect of the Programme Delivery Office will be regular reporting on the status of the Plan through regular progress reports. The operations of the Water Policy Advisory Committee (WPAC), the National Coordination Management Committee (NCMC) and the National Technical Implementation Group (NTIG) will be reviewed and re-focused to ensure effective oversight of the implementation of the Plan.

The Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) will continue to drive public engagement, participation, and consultation with communities and stakeholders at local level through the new public participation fora, and co-ordinate these activities across all 31 Local Authorities.

In addition, the EPA will continue to lead on networking and knowledge sharing. The WFD app and the catchments.ie website both act as information and data repositories and as knowledge-sharing tools to allow better targeting of measures and co-ordination of implementation. These will also be supported by the introduction of a dedicated campaign website, which will act as a central data and information hub on the progress of the Plan.

Funding the Programme of Measures

The projected expenditure for the 3rd cycle RBMP from 2023 to 2027 is a conservative minimum of €716.5million. This is a 137% increase on the estimated expenditure for Cycle 2 (2015-2021). However, this investment may be increased by government as a more precise picture emerges at the local level through the 46 Catchment Management Work Plans regarding the measures needed and as more accurate estimates of the cost of measures are made. This plan commits to review progress with the implementation of measures and to reanalyse the distance to environmental targets. Where additional measures and resources are identified as necessary, these will be considered and addressed. The Cabinet Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change will work to establish a comprehensive cross government financing and implementation strategy taking account of the national River Basin Management Plan, the National Biodiversity Action Plan, the forthcoming Nature Restoration Law and the Climate Action Plan. This is in line with the ambitious Water, Climate and Biodiversity objectives committed to in the Programme for Government.

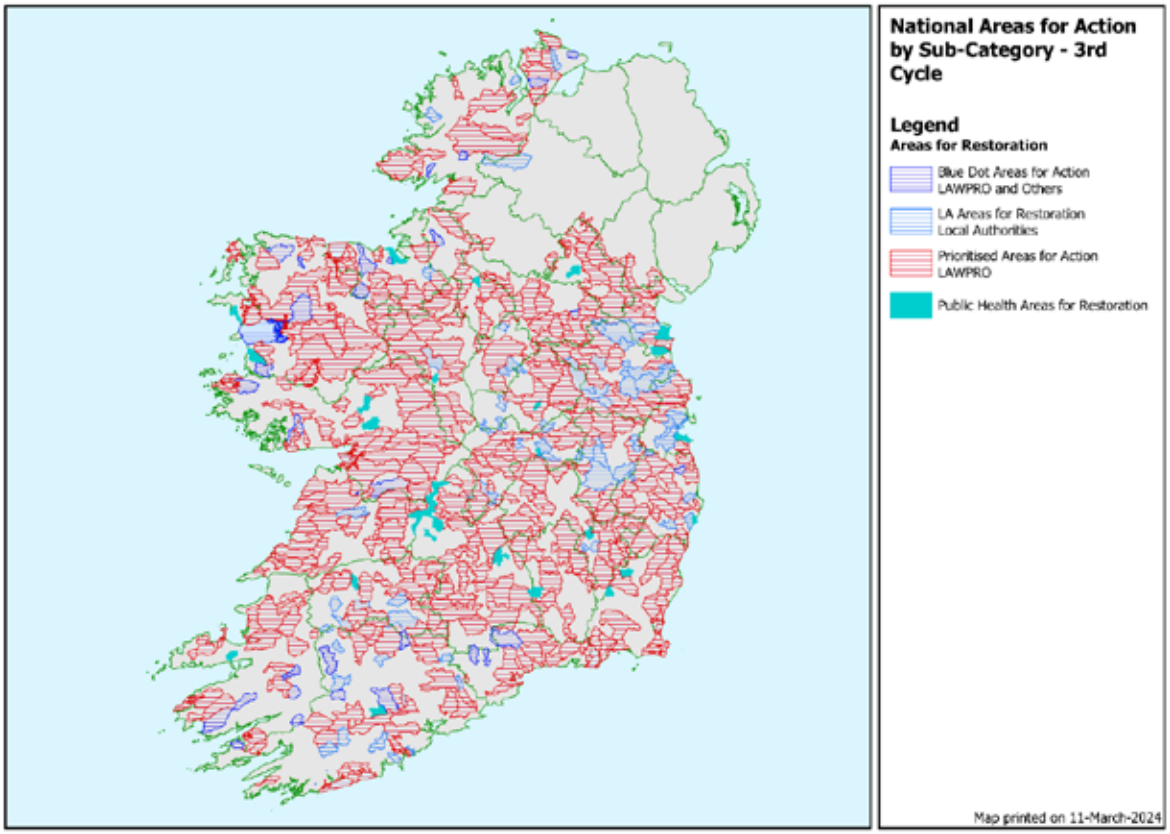
Expected Outcomes

Based on the information set out in the draft plan, it is expected to achieve the following over the period to 2027:

- **46 local Catchment Management Work Plans** will be developed, led by LAWPRO to supplement the national River Basin Management Plan. In addition, several supporting Sectoral Action Work Plans will be developed for several sectors including, Agriculture, Pressures on Hydromorphology, Forestry and Urban Wastewater.
- The **Sectoral Action Work Plan for Agriculture** will include targeted measures to address the 1,000 water bodies at risk from agriculture during the third-cycle, along with protection measures needed to prevent further deterioration.
- The EPA and local authorities will ensure that inspections, follow-up inspections and enforcement actions for agricultural activities will be enhanced with up to **4,500 farm inspections per annum** undertaken during the lifetime of the Nitrates Action Programme.
- The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine will undertake **500-1,000 inspections per year** under the GAP Regulations focused in Q1 where risk of nutrient impact on water quality is high.
- The aim of the **national agricultural Eco-scheme** under the CAP Strategic Plan is to reward farmers for undertaking actions beneficial to the climate, environment, water quality and biodiversity. It is anticipated that up to **110,000 farmers** will avail of this measure.
- The new national Agri-environmental schemes under the CAP Strategic Plan called ACRES incorporates targeted measures for water protection and restoration. **ACRES Co-operation Projects** (€740 million) are available to **20,000 farmers** in defined high priority geographical areas, including high status objective water bodies. **ACRES General** (€750 million) is available nationally for up to **30,000 farmers** outside of the project areas.
- Recognising that there is a significant proportion of farmers that may be having a significant impact on water quality but do not tend to participate in voluntary Agri-environmental schemes for various reasons the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in collaboration with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has commissioned a **national large-scale Water EIP** (European Innovation Partnership) project focussed on water to address this gap, thereby supporting the RBMP. The overall value is €60 milllion over five years (2023-2027). The estimated capacity in the scheme is approximately **15,000 farmers**. This large-scale project will be led by LAWPRO, Teagasc and the Dairy Industry working in partnership with a wide range of other stakeholders.
- Approximately 5% (270) of the **2,000-7,000 problem barriers** on rivers will be mitigated as part of the **National Barriers Mitigation Programme**.
- The roadmap of actions to improve fish migration in the Lower River Shannon at the Hydroelectric scheme located at Parteen Basin and Ardnacrusha will be implemented with an initial budget of €10 million. The initial phase will include **the design and construction of a new fish pass at Parteen.**
- Compilation of **actions proposed for the 216 water bodies at risk from Forestry**. These will be reflected in the "Forests and Water: Achieving Objectives under Ireland's River Basin Management Plan 2023-2027" as the **Forestry Sectoral Action Work Plan**.

- During the investment period 2020-2024, Uisce Éireann is **investing in 108 wastewater treatment plants, 77 collection networks and 92 related national programmes at an estimated cost of €2.3bn**. For the third RBMP cycle (2022-2027) new infrastructure projects will be delivered. **139 upgrades to storm water overflows** will be completed.
- **5,800 inspections of Domestic Wastewater Treatment Systems** will be undertaken between 2022 and 2026 under the National Inspection Plan.
- The delivery of **guidance for planning authorities on physical planning and the water framework directive** will contribute to the protection of waters from deterioration arising from inappropriate future development. Supporting technical guidance will also ensure that best environmental practice is applied where alternations to surface waters are undertaken.
- The **Review of Local Authority Resources** will be completed with the aim of putting in place appropriate resources to support individual local authorities in fulfilling their role in water quality protection and restoration.
- **Additional LAWPRO staff** will be put in place to provide further support to the implementation of the RBMP.
- The **Communities Water Development Fund** will be reviewed with the aim of strengthening it.
- In total, **517 Areas for Action** have been selected for focused attention in the third-cycle based on risk. This compares to 190 Areas for Action during the second-cycle (2018–2021). The remaining at risk water bodies which fall outside the 517 Areas for Action will still benefit from existing and newly introduced measures. As resources allow these will be targeted for investigative assessments and further action, where necessary, through the prioritisation processes at regional committee level. (Figure 2.)
- **46 Catchment Community Fora (CCF)** will be established during the lifetime of the 3rd cycle RBMP. Public participation will increase over time beginning with the establishment of Pilot Catchment Community Fora (CCF), with the objective of co-designing a framework, which will trial different engagement methods for the establishment of the fora.
- On the basis of the analysis of the distance to environmental targets, as of September 2023, the EPA has conservatively estimated that out of the approximately **2,200 water bodies** that have not met their objectives, **between 150 and 300 water bodies are likely to improve significantly and achieve their status objectives** as a result of the implementation of the programme of measures contained in this plan. **A further 500-650 water bodies will have targeted measures planned and will see improvements in specific water quality elements (e.g. reductions in pollutant levels)**, even if that is not to the level required to meet the status objectives. **Approximately 850 water bodies are unlikely to have specific, targeted measures at water body level planned and are therefore very unlikely to achieve their status objectives by 2027**. **A further total of 583 water bodies are in *'Review'*, which means additional evidence is required to confirm the nature of any water quality issues and the impacts from any relevant pressures.** The analysis does not forecast which water bodies may decline in quality over the period and no longer meet their objective. However, protection measures are planned, particularly strengthened and targeted regulatory enforcement, which are expected to contribute to protecting at risk water bodies from deterioration. The analysis of the distance to environmental targets will be used by the EPA's Water Programme to track and report the outcomes of the measures and the plan during the 3rd cycle.

Figure 2. Map of third-cycle Areas for Action



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