

Nitrates Expert Group (NEG)

Terms of Reference

Introduction

Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) gives effect to the requirements of the Nitrates Directive and its purpose is to prevent pollution of surface waters and groundwater from agricultural sources and to protect and improve water quality. The Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is responsible for publishing the NAP, in consultation with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The first NAP was published as the Good Agricultural Practice Regulations in 2006 with subsequent NAPs published in 2010, 2013, 2017 and 2022. Ireland's current NAP and Good Agricultural Practice Regulations (S.I. 113 of 2022) will run until the end of 2025.

In developing the NAP, the Ministers seek scientific advice from the Nitrates Expert Group. This group is chaired jointly by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), and comprises senior scientific experts from DHLGH, DAFM, and supported by technical experts on water quality and agriculture from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Teagasc.

Ireland's current (Fifth) Nitrates Action Programme concludes in 2025. For the first time a formal interim review is to be undertaken in 2023 during the period of the Fifth NAP. The final review of the overall Fifth NAP programme will start in 2024 to inform the development of the Sixth NAP.

Functions

The key objective of the NEG is to provide scientific advice to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine on measures to protect water quality and the environment against pollution from agricultural nutrients. Scientific review and advice will be required on any proposed additional measures that may be required during the Fifth NAP. Scientific advice will also be required for developing measures for the Sixth NAP.

This advice will involve:

- Bringing forward scientific research data and information pertaining to water quality pressures from agricultural sources,

- Undertaking scientific assessment of any proposed new measures in order to assess their likely impact on addressing agricultural pressures
- Provide ongoing scientific advice and support to both Ministers during the implementation of the NAP, and
- Reviewing submissions from public consultations and providing scientific guidance on how the submissions can be considered in the NAP.

Membership

The NEG membership will include:

- the Department of the Housing, Local Government and Heritage;
- the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine,
- the Environmental Protection Agency;
- Teagasc;

In addition, following consultation with the NEG, other professional, scientific or representative experts may be invited to advise the group for a specified task as deemed necessary.

Confidentiality

To facilitate a positive group dynamic, and to protect any sensitive material circulated or communicated within the group, the internal deliberations of the NEG are to be treated as confidential, unless otherwise agreed by all of the participants in the NEG. The meeting agendas and minutes will be made available publicly on the DHLGH website.

Operation

Representatives of the Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine shall jointly chair the NEG meetings. The group will convene at least quarterly. Additional meetings may be convened, as required. The NEG may establish working groups, as required, to progress individual products / projects needed to further support the effective implementation of the NAP. The DHLGH will provide secretarial support to the NEG and circulate documentation in a timely manner.

These Terms of Reference will be reviewed at the start of the 6th NAP.