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Irish Farmers' Association

Farmers Guide to Protecting Water Quality in Co. Wexford

YOUR ASSOCIATION. YOUR VOICE.

MESSAGE FROM IFA

Farmers recognise that agriculture plays a vital role in achieving the water quality targets set by the Water Framework Directive. In Co. Wexford, they are taking proactive steps to protect local water bodies by implementing practical on-farm measures—such as improving nutrient management, fencing off watercourses, reducing runoff, and adopting targeted solutions like sediment traps and catch crops. These actions are already making a positive impact, with improvements in water quality recorded across the county.

Farmers efforts are being reinforced through a coordinated, whole-of-government approach that brings together agencies such as the Environment Protection Agency (EPA), Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM), Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) and Teagasc. Targeted supports, including Better Farming for Water campaign and financial assistance under the €60 million Farming for Water EIP, are helping farmers go beyond regulatory requirements to protect and restore water bodies.

By taking action now, we can continue to protect our rivers, lakes, and coastal waters—supporting sustainable farming and clean water for everyone.

John Murphy
Environment and Rural Affairs Chair

Jer O'Mahony
Wexford Environment and Rural Affairs Representative

Water Quality

Under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) Ireland has a legally binding target to achieve good ecological and chemical status for all surface waters (rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal waters, and groundwater) by 2027.

Compliance with the Nitrates Directive is a legal minimum requirement under the WFD. The primary objective of the Nitrates Directive is to reduce and prevent water pollution caused or induced by nitrates from agricultural sources.

National Water Quality Status

- The EPA Water Quality in Ireland Report 2013-2018 shows that 54% of Irish surface waters meet the WFD high or good ecological status.
- Agriculture is classified as the primary pressure in over 1,000 or 32% of water bodies (see Figure 1).

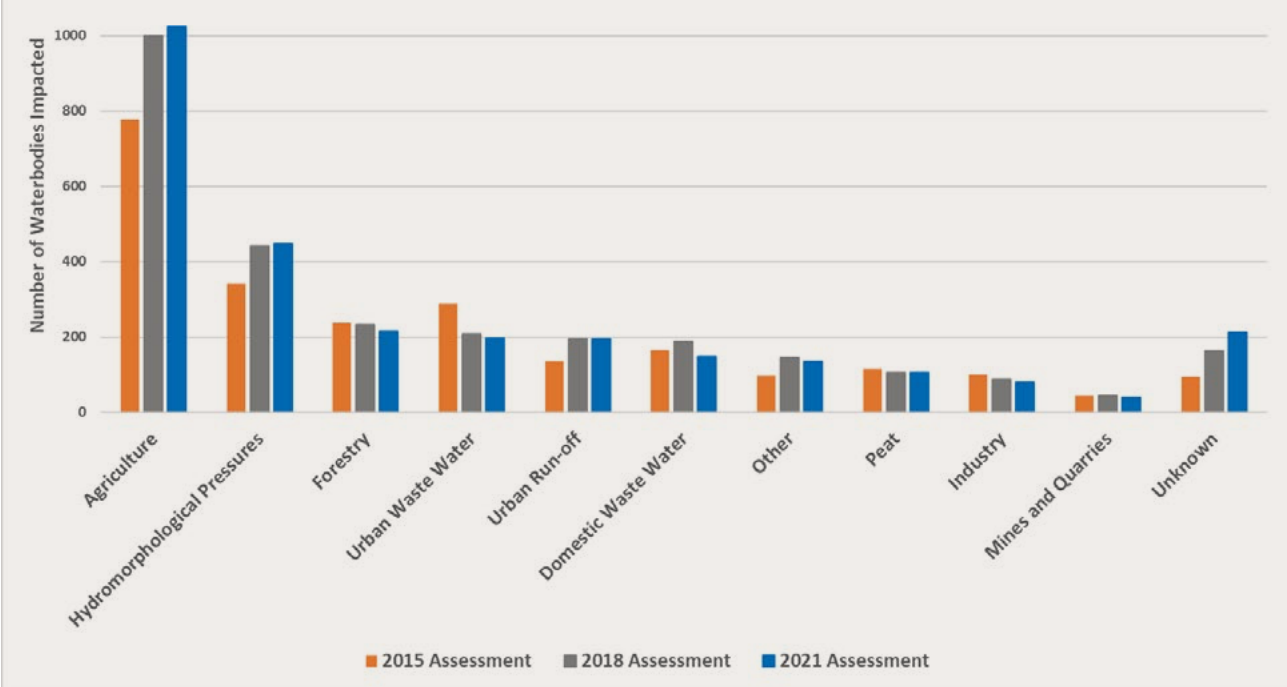
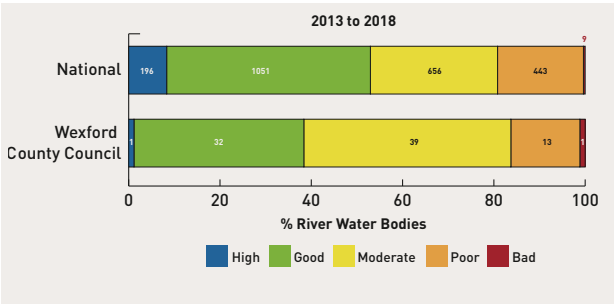


Figure 1. Pressures impacting water quality nationally (source: EPA)

Co. Wexford Water Quality Status

- In Co. Wexford 44% of rivers have high or good ecological status while 31% have moderate ecological status with overall water quality in rivers improving (see Figure 1 and 2).
- The pressures on water quality in Co. Wexford are similar to the pressures at national level with agriculture being the predominant pressure.



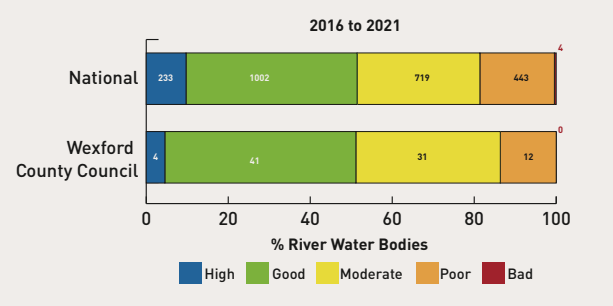


Figure 2. Comparison of ecological status of rivers 2013 -2018 v's 2016 v's 2021 (source: EPA)

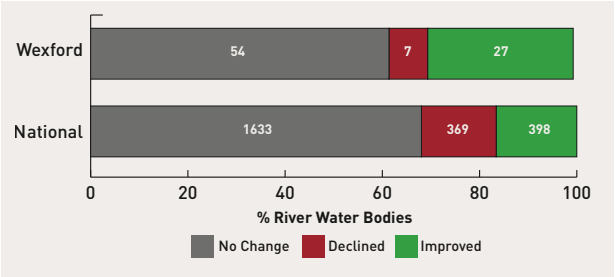


Figure 3. Ecological Status Change in Rivers 2013-2018 vs 2016-2021 (source EPA)

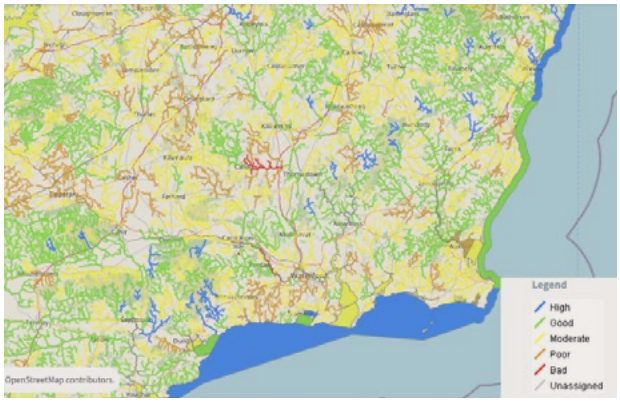


Figure 4. Water Framework Directive status of all waterbodies in Co. Wexford.

WATERBODY	WFD ECOLOGICAL STATUS
RIVERS	• 4% of its rivers had high ecological status, 41% had good status, 31% had moderate status and 12% had poor status (source EPA Water Quality Report 2016 to 2021). • There are two major rivers in Co. Wexford, the River Slaney has generally good water quality status, while the River Barrow ranges from moderate to good.
ESTUARIES & COASTAL	• There are 14 transitional water bodies in the county. • There were two (Lady's Island Lake and Ballyteige Channels) was recorded as 'bad' status with the Lower Slaney Estuary recording 'poor' status. Three water bodies had 'good' status, four had 'moderate' status with the remaining four unassigned a status. • There are 6 coastal waterbodies in the county. Three have moderate status, one good status while the remaining two were unassigned a status.
GROUNDWATER	• There are 12 water bodies, 9 of which have good status and 3 poor status.

Table 1. Overview of the water quality status in waterbodies in Co. Wexford (sourced Wexford Co. Development Plan)

Priority Action Areas in Co. Wexford

- Priority action areas are catchments, sub-catchments, or water bodies identified under the WFD where water quality is at risk or declining or there are significant pressures.
- The River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) identified 189 Priority Areas for Action nationally, there are 8 PAAs in Wexford (Sow, Wexford Coastal Lagoons, Owenavorragh, Urrin, Wexford Harbour, Blackwater, Bannow and Waterford Harbour).

Agricultural Pressures on Water Quality

- Nutrient runoff (Nitrogen and Phosphorus) is the primary agricultural pressure.
- It is reported by the EPA that in Co. Wexford, nitrates is an issue in 42% of river sites, largely due to diffuse runoff from fertilised grasslands and tillage, while phosphorus is high in 28% of river sites, typically linked to inadequate fencing, which allows livestock direct access to streams.

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
RUNOFF FROM FERTILISERS/ SLURRY	Nitrate and phosphorus leach into water bodies, especially during heavy rainfall or over-application periods.
LACK OF RIPARIAN FENCING	Livestock entering streams causes bank erosion and direct nutrient input (faeces/urine).
SOIL TYPE & DRAINAGE	Light, free-draining soils in parts of Wexford (e.g. southeast) exacerbate nitrate leaching. While heavy soils, particularly in Ballycanew, drive phosphorus and sediment pollution.
FARMYARD RUNOFF	Nutrient-rich effluent from yards and silage pits can reach streams if containment is poor.

Table 2. Main agricultural pressures on water quality in Co. Wexford

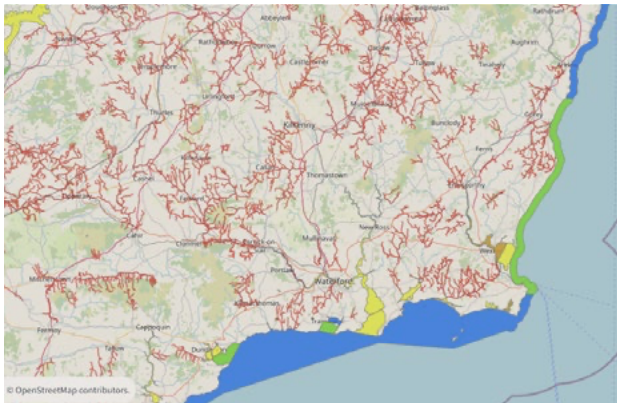


Figure 5. Rivers where agriculture is identified as the primary pressure on water quality status.

The EPA's Targeting Agricultural Measures map identifies flags by sub-basin showing whether nitrates (orange), phosphorus/ sediment (navy), or mixed pressures apply locally.

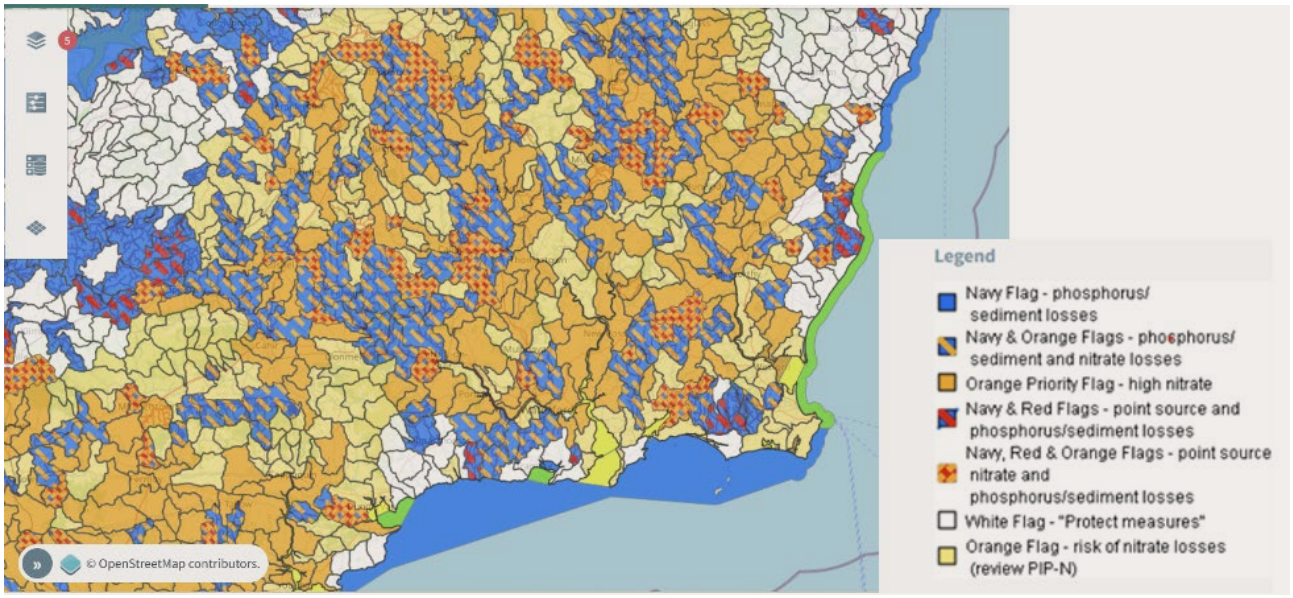


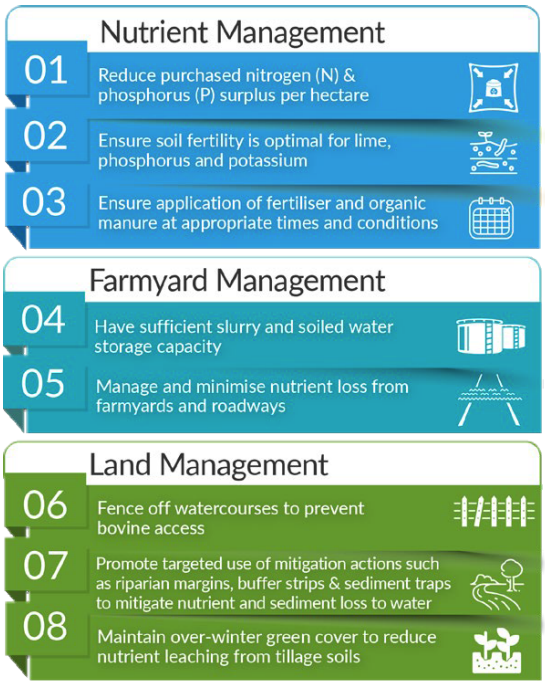
Figure 6. The different type agricultural pressures on water quality in Co. Wexford.

Catchment-by-Catchment Snapshot

CATCHMENT	SOIL TYPE	MAIN AGRICULTURAL PRACTICE	WFD STATUS HIGHLIGHTS
Castledockerell	Free draining	Spring barley & tillage	High N concentrations (\~7 mg/L)
Ballycanew	Heavy, poorly drained	Mixed grazing & tillage	High Phosphorus/ Sediment risk from runoff
Slaney sub-catchments	Mixed soils & land use	Dairy & grazing	Generally good, but estuary is poor
Aughboy	Mixed	Mixed land use	Bad water status

The Better Farming for Water campaign, 8-Actions for Change

The Better Farming for Water campaign builds on existing water quality programmes to support all farmers to reduce the loads of nitrogen, phosphate, sediment, and pesticides entering our river network through either diffuse or point source pathways from agricultural sources. This will be achieved through the on-farm adoption of better nutrient, farmyard, and land management practices.



Farming for Water EIP

Funding is potentially available to farmers in Co. Wexford under the Farming for Water EIP.

The project is a €60 million farmer and advisory led initiative to project and restore water quality. The project is open to all farmers with land in priority action areas (PAAs) and all dairy and tillage farmers in nitrates catchments of concern where targeted water quality improvements are needed.

Under the project funding is provided for measures that are over and above regulatory requirements, i.e. supplementary measures like sediment traps, riparian areas, catch crops, etc. The measures available will depend on what pressures are impacting water quality. For more information on the project go to: **https://farmingforwater.ie/**.

Next Steps for Farmers

1. Check your location in EPA's online Targeting Agricultural Measures map to see the pressure flags and measures needed to reduce the pressure from your farm. To access maps go to: **https://gis.epa.ie/EPAMaps/agriculture**.

1. Contact your local Teagasc ASSAP advisor for free advice and check if you are eligible for funding under the Farming For Water EIP, for contact details go to: **https://www.teagasc.ie/environment/water-quality/farming-for-water-quality-assap/people/**.

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