

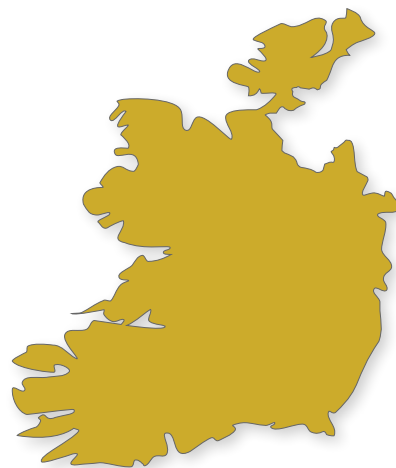
DEVELOPING IRELAND'S NATURE RESTORATION PLAN: A MID-TERM ASSESSMENT

The Nature Restoration Law (NRL) is a recent, significant piece of nature legislation that covers all terrestrial and marine ecosystems. For its implementation, Member States are required to develop a national Nature Restoration Plan (NRP) by September 2026. The quality of NRPs will determine the law's actual effect to restore ecosystems across Europe. The #RestoreNature coalition has developed a checklist to evaluate the preparation of restoration plans across EU Member States at mid-term, based on four criteria: science-based, inclusiveness, ambition and empowerment. This factsheet provides an assessment of the progress made by Ireland in developing its national NRP.

OVERALL PROGRESS

Ireland faces a severe biodiversity crisis, with 85% of protected habitats in unfavourable condition. Key pressures include agricultural intensification, commercial forestry, peat extraction, overfishing, and weak enforcement of environmental law. While targeted projects have demonstrated nature restoration is possible, low political commitment, underfunding, poor capacity, and slow progress threaten Ireland's ability to deliver the EU Nature Restoration Law (NRL).

Despite this, Ireland's Nature Restoration Plan (NRP) has a strong foundation: an independently chaired Advisory Committee, sectoral Leaders' Forums, and community outreach. Technical working groups provide coordinated expertise. Despite this, ambition, transparency, and funding remain insufficient to deliver Nature Restoration at scale.



EARLY STAGE

ASSESSMENT HIGHLIGHTS



Good practices and achievements

- **Inclusive stakeholder engagement:** Ireland uses a three-tier framework to ensure broad participation (Independent Advisory Committee (IAC), Leaders Forums, Community Conversations). The independently chaired IAC brings in diverse NGO, academic, and sectoral expertise.
- **All-of-Government approach:** Ireland has adopted a coordinated approach with multiple departments leading relevant elements of the plan.
- **Structured interdepartmental expertise:** Four technical interdepartmental working groups (IWGs) —Land, Urban, Marine, and Finance—bring together subject matter experts from across government to establish baselines, identify data gaps, and propose evidence-based restoration measures.
- **Evidence-based target setting:** Technical working groups have established baselines, geospatial datasets, and monitoring frameworks for terrestrial, urban, and marine ecosystems.
- **Enhanced interdepartmental coordination:** Bringing together multiple departments and agencies has strengthened technical capacity, fostered shared responsibility, and aligned restoration objectives.
- **Proactive delivery of Art 9:** Ireland has been proactive in the implementation of Article 9, identifying almost 39,000 artificial barriers to date, with 22 barriers mitigated from 2020 to 2024, reconnecting over 127 km of river channels to improve fish passage.



To be improved

- **Improvement expected on transparency and stakeholder engagement:** While Ireland has established a strong three-tiered engagement framework, more consistent and open engagement is needed — particularly on site selection, restoration measures, and data sharing.
- **Progress exists on scientific evidence and interdepartmental coordination, but needs to be taken further:** Further investment is needed to ensure that all relevant scientific data (including NGO and academic datasets) are fully integrated and that knowledge gaps are systematically addressed.
- **Improvement expected on capacity and resourcing for implementation:** While political commitment has been signalled and a Finance Working Group established, there remains a need for clear financial commitments and increased capacity within competent authorities.



Delays and inadequacies

- **Limited stakeholder participation:** Structures for inclusive engagement are in place, but so far they have delivered broad rather than deep participation. Lack of transparency and limited willingness from key authorities have restricted stakeholder and expert engagement on target setting, site selection, and management measures.
- **Unclear funding:** Despite Ministerial commitments, dedicated funding for the NRP remains unclear. Previously earmarked funds were reallocated.
- **Public land commitments not delivered:** Ministers have repeatedly committed that key restoration targets would be prioritised on public land. Yet currently the largest semi-state landowners have no plans to align their management with the Nature Restoration Law.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Fund Ireland's Nature Restoration Plan

- Establish a Dedicated, Ring-Fenced Nature Restoration Fund.
- Ensure Multi-Annual, Long-Term Financing.

2. Unlock the potential of public land for large-scale nature restoration

- Reform the Mandates of Coillte and Bord na Móna and issue new letters of expectation.
- Ring-fence a proportion of their annual profits for Nature Restoration.

3. Strengthen transparency, participation, and evidence-based planning

- Ensure Open, Science-Led, and Inclusive engagement with eNGOs, scientists, stakeholders, and local communities.

4. Radically improve implementation and enforcement of environmental laws

- Improvement needed on designation, protection, and active management of sites on land and at sea. Strengthened enforcement and resourcing are essential.

5. Address knowledge gaps

- Expand Coordinated Research data collection and monitoring, particularly in the marine environment.

DETAILED ASSESSMENT

Is the NRP development process...

Key facts

- **Insufficient engagement with experts and citizen science** - Art 5 coordinators have been proactive in engaging experts but there has been insufficient engagement on Art 4 and a reluctance to even accept submissions and GIS data within the IAC.
- **Establishing Favourable Reference Area** - The NPWS Favourable Reference Area (FRA) values are flawed failing to take into account recent and historical losses, ecological coherence, projected changes due to climate change.
- **Rewetting targets** - The scope of land subject to rewetting and restoration requirements under Article 11(4) is not aligned with the NRLs definition of organic soils in agricultural use constituting drained peatlands.
- **Inaction on Art 8** - Officials from the Department of Housing (DHLGH) have predicted delays in integrating the Article 8 urban greening requirements into Ireland's planning system.
- **Inequal emphasis across legal obligations** - To date there has been insufficient engagement on the habitat re-establishment targets under Art 4(4) and Art 5(2). There has been virtually no discussion on the species targets or the habitat connectivity targets.

Recommendations

- **Insufficient engagement with experts and citizen science**
 1. Strengthen engagement with NGOs, academics, and citizen scientists.
 2. Address knowledge gaps systematically through dedicated research funding, coordinated data collection, and clear methodological frameworks.
- **Establishing Favourable Reference Area** - Reassess FRA Targets ensuring full compliance with the requirements of Art 4(4) and Art 14(2).
- **Rewetting targets** - DAFM should ensure that all organic soils in agricultural use constituting drained peatlands (339,000 ha) fall under the Article 11(4) obligations.
- **Inaction on Art 8** - The Minister for Housing should use existing powers, to immediately direct planning authorities on incorporating urban greening obligations under Article 8 of the NRL, avoiding any unnecessary delay in implementation.
- **Unequal emphasis across legal obligations** - The relevant authorities must ensure equal and balanced implementation of all legal obligations of the NRR. In particular habitat re-establishment, species habitat restoration and enhanced habitat connectivity under Art 4 and Art 5.
- **Inclusive stakeholder participation** - Strengthen transparency and deepen stakeholder participation by ensuring open, consistent engagement on site selection, restoration measures, and data sharing. Key authorities should clearly demonstrate how scientific evidence, and stakeholder inputs inform decisions, enabling an ambitious and inclusive NRP with broad public and sectoral buy-in.

Science-based?



Inclusive?



Ambitious?



- **Potential use of derogations** - The first meeting of the Leaders' Forum recommended the NRP avoid using derogations. Despite these derogations are being proposed for habitats which have larger re-establishment targets under Art 4(4).
- **Nature restoration on public land**
 - Public lands, managed by Coillte and Bord na Móna, represent a unique opportunity to achieve nature restoration at scale.
- However, both agencies currently operate under outdated, commercial mandates. Despite Government commitments no meaningful action has been taken to unlock their potential.
- **Potential use of derogations** - The plan should be ambitious, inspiring and motivating collective action across all sectors while committing to no further deterioration of nature. It must achieve 100% implementation with full commitment and no derogations.
- **Nature restoration on public land**
 - Reform the legal mandates of Coillte and Bord na Móna, aligning them with the NRL.
 - Issue New Letters of Expectation emphasizing the delivery of the NRL.
 - Require both agencies to allocate a proportion of their annual profits directly to implementing Ireland's NRP.

Empowered?



- **Dedicated EU Funding** - There is no ringfenced funding allocated to the implementation of the NRR within the proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034.
- **Dedicated Irish Funding** - There is no dedicated funding allocated to the NRP in the Government's new National Development Plan.
- **Increased capacity within competent authorities** - The NPWS remains under resourced to deliver on existing legal obligations. The implementation of the NRR will place even greater demands on the NPWS.
- **Ensure that Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan is aligned with the NRP**
 - Elements of the NRR such as Art10 and Art 11 require improvements in habitat quality and quantity on farmland across the country. The CAP is the most appropriate tool to achieve nature restoration across farmland.
- **Close the implementation gap** - The vast majority of Natura 2000 sites lack Site Specific Conservation Objectives or management plans. In the marine environment Ireland has one of the worst records when it comes to spatial designations and Ireland is still without dedicated Marine Protected Area legislation.
- **Dedicated EU Funding** - The Minister should support calls within the ENVI Council for dedicated EU funding for the implementation of the NRR within the next MFF.
- **Dedicated Irish Funding** - The Government should establish a dedicated, ring-fenced funding stream for the NRP, to ensure that restoration actions are fully resourced through 2030 and beyond.
- **Increased capacity within competent authorities** - Increased capacity is needed within competent authorities and in particular the NPWS.
- **Ensure that Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan is aligned with the NRP** - Ensure CAP funds directly support restoration of semi-natural habitats, pollinator & farmland bird recovery, and water quality.
- **Close the implementation gap** - Site Specific Conservation Objectives and management plans need to be implemented across the Natura 2000 network. In the marine environment Ireland has one of the worst records when it comes to spatial designations and Ireland is still without dedicated Marine Protected Area legislation.