

Last updated July 2024



Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan

Ulster Wildlife welcomes Minister Muir's statement today (2 July 2024) concerning the Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan. While recent delays have been frustrating, we are pleased that the delivery of 20 actions under the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA) will now commence. We hope the remaining 17 actions requiring Executive approval will be signed off imminently. Nature is in crisis, and Lough Neagh, which is crucial for both people and wildlife, demands decisive and effective measures for its recovery—a process that could take many years.

The Minister's announcement is timely, coinciding with the release of the Implementation Report for the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2020-2023. This report highlights ongoing challenges with nutrient loads in waterways, revealing increases in nitrate levels from some rivers entering Lough Neagh despite current interventions.

We welcome the focus on education and investment to ensure all stakeholders in the catchment understand their roles and take appropriate measures to reduce nutrient flow into the Lough. Additionally, we support a robust approach to monitoring and enforcement, including a review of penalties for breaches, to deter harmful practices. This is particularly important as stakeholders are given opportunities to change through the outlined education and investment measures.

While we recognise the efforts to address the issues facing Lough Neagh, we are concerned about the scale and pace of implementation, especially regarding the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme training and the development of replacement Agri-Environment Schemes (Farm Nature) for the expired and expiring Environmental Farming Schemes. We have consistently advocated for a more ambitious rollout of these schemes across the country, which would also benefit the Lough Neagh catchment.

Partnership working is essential for achieving positive outcomes, and we commend Minister Muir's collaborative approach with government agencies, industry, and eNGOs to develop practical, effective solutions that deliver value for money. We urge the continuation of this approach in implementing the Lough Neagh plan and similar initiatives nationwide.

Our experience shows that farming and industry value the involvement of non-statutory agencies and eNGOs in providing training and practical support focused on improved outcomes rather than non-compliance. The Department should consider these delivery models alongside increasing internal resources to enhance their effectiveness.

For further information email communications@ulsterwildlife.org

Last updated October 23



Lough Neagh Algal Bloom

The causes of the Lough Neagh algal bloom are due to an interconnected combination of issues with no quick, simple solution. Government needs to put in place a long-term strategy which addresses the issues - including all sources of pollution, invasive species management and the impacts of climate change – in order to protect this essential resource for both nature and people. With increasing temperatures due to climate change, blue green algal blooms are likely to become more common and there is no room for complacency or delay. All those with a regulatory role must discharge their responsibilities robustly. Anyone found in breach of regulations, from whatever sector, must be held to account.

The NI soil nutrient health scheme for farmland is underway and its implementation will make an important contribution to reducing phosphate levels. Investment in agricultural technology, upgrades in NI Water waste-water treatment infrastructure and in domestic septic tanks will be required. Further research on the management of zebra mussels is also required.

43% of NI land area ultimately drains into Lough Neagh which provides water for 750,000 local people. It is also one of our most important natural assets and designated as a Ramsar site, Special Protection Area (SPA) and Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) being home to some of our rarest and most iconic species.

Alongside other stakeholders, Ulster Wildlife is helping to develop river basin management plans for Northern Ireland which will set out actions to improve freshwater conditions and we work with farmers and landowners to help them adjust to the changing environment. We are also part of the NI Freshwater Task Force, comprised of environmental NGOs, to encourage legislative change to improve water quality in our rivers, lakes, and streams. We manage three nature reserves within the Lough Neagh catchment and ensure they are sensitively managed to support good water quality.

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