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NORTHERN IRELAND ENVIRONMENT WEEK 21st - 25th SEPTEMBER 2015



Representatives from across the environment sector gathered for an evening reception at the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings on the 21st September to celebrate the launch of the first Northern Ireland Environment Week.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Environment Committee hosted a series of events in Parliament Buildings as part of the first Northern Ireland Environment Week organised by Northern Ireland Environment Link. The aim of Environment Week was to provide opportunities for MLAs to engage with the local environmental sector to celebrate Northern Ireland's environment.

Anna Lo MLA MBE, Chairperson of the Environment Committee said: *"In today's busy world, events like this provide us all with an opportunity to appreciate what our local environment has to offer. It is vital for our health and well-being. We depend on it for food, energy, raw materials and water. We have a wealth of built heritage, habitats and wildlife which we need to look after. As Chair of the Environment Committee, I am delighted to launch the first Environment Week for Northern Ireland and look forward to seeing this event prosper in the years to come."*

The reception also marked the launch of the Northern Ireland Species Champions whereby public representatives will be invited to choose from a list of species that are currently facing significant threats to their future and work with local environmental organisations to then champion their survival.

Minister Mark H Durkan took the opportunity to congratulate NIEL and the Environment Committee for organising the week. He said: "This is a good example of how our eNGO sector can help us to deliver environmental outcomes. As budgets come under increasing pressure, their expertise and enthusiasm in securing match funding and harnessing volunteers will become ever more important."

Patrick Casement, Chairperson of Northern Ireland Environment Link, commented, 'Environment Week is a celebration of Northern Ireland's environment and all those involved in protecting and enhancing it. It is also an opportunity to raise awareness of environmental issues primarily among our public representatives. This year has proven to be quite a challenge to the environment sector and it is more important than ever that we all work together in the interests of our built and natural environment.'

Executive Committee Business

Renewables Obligation Closure Order (NI) 2015 (28 September)

[Full Debate](#)

The ETI Minister moved: *That the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be approved.* Renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland is incentivised through the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO). Since its introduction in 2005, the NIRO has been instrumental in increasing renewable deployment in NI from 3% renewable electricity consumption in 2005 to just over 20% now. As part of UK-wide electricity market reform, the NIRO, along with the other two renewables obligations in GB, is scheduled to close to new generation in March 2017. A consultation on NIRO closure in 2017 was undertaken in 2012. The majority of respondents at that time agreed that it would not be viable to keep the NIRO open after 2017 if the other two renewables obligations in GB were to close. In March 2015, DETI issued a consultation on NIRO transition and closure grace periods. However, prior to the publication of a DETI response in June 2015, the new Secretary of State for Energy, Amber Rudd MP, announced the closure of the renewables obligations in Great Britain to onshore wind from 1 April 2016. Since that time, discussions have been ongoing with DECC regarding NI's policy position on onshore wind. Due to those protracted negotiations with DECC and in the interests of providing legislative clarity to all non-wind technologies, the Minister took the decision to take forward the legislation in two stages: first, non-wind, to be followed by onshore wind as soon as possible. A Government response specifically on non-wind closure grace periods was issued in August 2015. The proposed Renewables Obligation Closure Order (NI) 2015 will close the NIRO to all non-wind technologies on 31 March 2017. The order will also introduce 12-month closure grace periods for non-wind projects that meet specified criteria.

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Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services Bill: Extension of Committee Stage (7 September)

[\(See Motion\)](#)

The Chair of the Committee for Regional Development sought and gained approval that the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services Bill be extended until 25 November 2015. The Water and Sewerage Services Bill will amend and confer power to amend the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, and for connected purposes. The Bill was introduced on Tuesday 16 June 2015, with its Second Stage taking place on Monday 29 June 2015, following which the Bill moved on to Committee Stage.

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Environmental Better Regulation Bill: Extension of Committee Stage (28 September)

[\(See Motion\)](#)

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment sought and gained approval that the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill be extended to 27 November 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill. The Bill is an enabling Bill and will provide for a more streamlined environmental permitting system; rationalise and simplify the powers of entry for environmental inspection and investigation; and amend existing environmental legislation regarding fuels and fireplaces, air quality assessment and drinking water regulation. The Committee has already concluded its call for evidence and has received 14 written submissions from interested organisations. The Committee it is essential that all stakeholders be given the opportunity to comment on the Bill and has already held three evidence sessions, and a stakeholder event has been arranged for 1 October to allow other organisations that submitted a response an opportunity to voice their views on the Bill.

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Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Loss of Trees and Woods (15 September)

[AQW 48574/11-16](#)

The Minister outlined how DARD monitors the loss of trees and woods and the amount of woodland lost in each year since 2011. The Forestry Act (2010) requires DARD to provide and maintain a Woodland Register and to publish the Register at intervals not exceeding 10 years. A draft Register was published by Forest Service in March 2013 and contained 111 thousand hectares of woodland. This is available on the DARD website broken down by local government district and as a map. Review of the Register will be the principal means by which Forest Service will monitor changes of woodland cover including loss of woodland. In addition to the Register, those seeking to remove woodland, other than woodland removal associated with development, come within the scope of the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations 2006 which is administered by Forest Service. This regulates deforestation for the purpose of converting woodland to another type of land use and contains thresholds above which a formal opinion must be sought from Forest Service to see if consent is required before work can begin. Since 2011, Forest Service has provided a formal opinion that no consents were required for deforestation of the following woodland areas: 10 hectares in 2011/12, 40 hectares in 2012/13 (which included 28 hectares of Short Rotation Coppice willow), 3 hectares in 2013/14 and 16 hectares in 2014/15. A list of the Department's opinions on these projects since 2012 is on a public register located on the DARD website.

Fisheries Bill and Rural Proofing Bill (15 September)

[AQW 48292/11-16](#)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development outlined what legislation her Department plans to bring forward by the end of the current Assembly mandate. She stated that she plans to bring forward two Bills in the remainder of the current mandate, a Fisheries Bill (in conjunction with my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure), and a Rural Proofing Bill. The Fisheries Bill will amend legislation to modernise fisheries enforcement powers, enable more efficient implementation of European legislation, create a national system for administrative penalties and update aquaculture licensing in line with elsewhere in Ireland. The Rural Proofing Bill will make statutory provision to enhance the existing rural proofing process. It will introduce a statutory duty on all Departments and local councils to consider the needs of rural dwellers when developing and implementing government policies and strategies and delivering public services.

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Woodland Creation Funds (22 September)

[AQW 48575/11-16](#)

The Minister stated that she has allocated £17.4 million to support woodland expansion and the management of existing woodland under the Rural Development Programme 2014-20, which is sufficient to create 1,800 hectares of new woodland and sustain approximately 4,000 hectares created under previous programmes. This will make a small but positive contribution towards our aim of 12% woodland area by the middle of this century. The Minister will review progress during the mid-term review when the availability of farmland for planting will be clearer.

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Minister of the Environment

Information on Fish Kills (15 September)

[AQW 48373/11-16](#)

The Environment Minister listed the number of fish kills investigated by the NIEA in each of the last three years and the fish killed in each incident:

Table A

Sector	2012	2013	2014
Farming	0	8	9
Industry	1	3	0
NIWL	1	0	1
Other	4	2	1
Transport	0	0	0
Domestic	0	0	0
Total	6	13	11

Table B

NIEA Incident Number	Date	Kill Count
WR 8/12/0002	09-Jan-12	20
WR 4/12/0094	02-Mar-12	50
WR 4/12/0778	19-May-12	5
WR 6/12/0780	24-May-12	55
WR 3/12/0143	07-Aug-12	20
WR 6/12/0182	17-Aug-12	100
WR 7/13/0044	25-Feb-13	137
WR 6/13/0068	28-Feb-13	6500
WR 4/13/0040	04-Mar-13	1000
WR 6/13/0157	04-Jun-13	60
WR 8/13/0074	10-Jul-13	1000
WR 8/13/0854	25-Jul-13	1540
WR 5/13/0120	31-Jul-13	9
WR 8/13/0855	09-Aug-13	60
WR 5/13/0134	21-Aug-13	4939
WR 2/13/0856	03-Sep-13	6
WR 1/13/0135	24-Sep-13	120
WR 6/13/0260	04-Oct-13	90
WR 1/13/0139	08-Oct-13	100
WR 2/14/0046	26-Feb-14	76
WR 2/14/0056	07-Mar-14	300
WR 7/14/0777	20-Apr-14	1918
WR 8/14/0854	02-Jun-14	201
WR 4/14/0860	10-Jun-14	45
WR 8/14/0856	15-Jun-14	235
WR 4/14/0123	27-Jun-14	398
WR 7/14/0781	08-Jul-14	400
WR 6/14/0207	23-Jul-14	582
WR 5/14/0712	27-Jul-14	48
WR 3/14/0227	29-Oct-14	964

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Oral Answers to Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Development Programme: LEADER (14 September)

[\(AQO 8605/11-16\)](#)

The Minister provided an update on the community-led local development (LEADER) element of the rural development programme. The European Commission approved the rural development programme for 2014 to 2020 on 25 August. That allowed DARD to issue interim local rural development strategy templates to local action groups, moving them into the final stage of the appointment process. DARD has set a return date of 31 December; however, officials will work at the pace of the fastest, and any of the 10 LAGs submitting a strategy before that date that meets the required standard will be eligible to receive a contract to deliver LEADER on behalf of the Department. That will cut some 18 months off the set-up time compared with the previous programme. The programme allows support for rural communities, farmers, farm businesses, rural businesses and the environment

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Rural Proofing Bill (14 September)

[\(AQO 8606/11-16\)](#)

Following a public consultation exercise to enhance the rural proofing process by placing it on a statutory footing, responses received indicated broad support for the proposals. These proposals are designed to promote a fair and inclusive rural society by introducing a duty on government and councils to consider the needs of our rural dwellers when they are developing their policies and delivering public services. Final policy proposals for a rural proofing Bill were agreed by the Executive on 7 July, and since then, officials have been working with the Office of the Legislative Counsel to produce a draft Bill that will give effect to these proposals. The intention is to ensure that this new legislation can be introduced in this Assembly and can complete its passage within the current mandate. It is proposed that the Bill will contain a number of provisions, including: a duty on Departments and district councils to consider the needs of people living in rural areas when they are developing their policies and delivering services; a duty on DARD to promote and encourage Departments and district councils to consider the needs of people living in rural areas; a duty on DARD to produce regular monitoring reports to be laid before the Assembly; provision for Departments and district councils to make arrangements for cooperation and collaboration to help to ensure a more consistent and cohesive approach to addressing the needs of rural dwellers; power for DARD to support rural proofing and the implementation of the Bill through the provision of training, advice and guidance; and power to make regulations to extend the Bill to non-departmental public bodies as may well be specified in such regulations.

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Ash Dieback (14 September)

[\(AQO 8610/11-16\)](#)

Surveillance and testing for ash dieback has been undertaken since the first confirmed findings of the disease in recently planted ash trees here, in November 2012. As of 7 September 2015, the number of positive sites confirmed is 93, including: 64 in forestry plantations, three in nursery/trade, nine in urban amenity settings, three on roadsides, 10 in private gardens and four in hedgerows. To date, there is no evidence of spread to mature ash trees locally.

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Minister of the Environment

GM Crops (22 September)

[\(AQO 8688/11-16\)](#)

The Minister explained that the European Commission has put in place transitional arrangements to allow member states to opt out of growing approved GM crops. To take advantage of those arrangements, member states must let the Commission know by Friday 2 October. Responsibility for matters relating to the deliberate release of GM material into the environment, including GM crops, rests with DoE. Accordingly, the Minister has announced that he was prohibiting the cultivation of

GM crops here as he was 'unconvinced of their advantages' and considered it prudent to prohibit their cultivation for the foreseeable future. He added that the pattern of land use here and the relatively small size of many agricultural holdings would create potential difficulties if we were to seek to keep GM and non-GM crops separate. He considers that the costs of doing so could be significant and, in many cases, totally impractical. The Minister concluded '*We are rightly proud of our natural environment and rich biodiversity. We are perceived internationally to have a clean, green image. I am concerned that the growing of GM crops, which is acknowledged to be controversial, could damage that image.*'

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Sellafield Nuclear Power Plant (22 September)

[\(AQO 8689/11-16\)](#)

The Minister was asked whether DoE has any involvement in monitoring accidents at, and environmental problems associated with, the Sellafield nuclear power plant. He replied that Nuclear energy and nuclear installations are excepted matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, as such, are not within the remit of the DoE. However DoE has responsibility for monitoring the environment in Northern Ireland to assess the impact of radioactivity produced elsewhere, including nuclear facilities such as Sellafield. NIEA has an environmental monitoring programme to assess any such impact on our coastline. The programme includes checks on the radiation levels of the coastline at approximately 50 locations around the North, as well as monitoring the levels of radioactivity in seawater, seaweed, shellfish and fish. The adequacy of the monitoring programme is reviewed regularly and, where appropriate, will take into account any changes in the discharge of radioactivity from Sellafield. The results of the programme are published annually in a joint report entitled 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment' produced by the four UK environment agencies, in conjunction with the Food Standards Agency. Results for last year, like previous years, indicate that the levels of contamination are negligible in terms of radiological impact on the population. He explained that on average, people in Northern Ireland receive 2,500 microsieverts of radiation a year from all natural and artificial sources. Of that, 50% is due to exposure to radon in the home, 12% is from medical exposure, and less than 0.1% is from nuclear discharges. It should be noted that the lowest yearly dose likely linked to increased cancer risk is 100,000 microsieverts.

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Climate Change Conference (22 September)

[\(AQO 8692/11-16\)](#)

The Minister was asked if he, or his officials, will be attending the 2015 UNs' climate change conference. He replied that the main aim of the 2015 United Nations conference in Paris will be to achieve a new international agreement to create the vital framework that the world needs to limit the average global temperature increase to below 2°C. By successfully doing so, we will help to combat climate change effectively, boost the transition towards resilient, low-carbon societies and avoid the worst impacts of climate change. *The Paris conference is, without doubt, an opportunity for the world's leaders to deliver a global climate agreement that is unquestionably in our, and the entire global community's, best interests.* The Minister has therefore written to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Amber Rudd, indicating that he intends to go to Paris, where he will make it clear that we should be striving to secure an ambitious international agreement this year and pushing for opportunities to increase the EU emissions reduction target further as a result.

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Environmental Protection (22 September)

[\(AQO 8693/11-16\)](#)

The Minister outlined his plans to ensure environmental protection in light of departmental restructuring. Most of DoE's environmental functions would be inherited by a proposed new Department, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). The Minister stated '*I believe that the proposals, as they stand, could create conflicts of priorities and responsibilities within the new DAERA. In short, the present arrangements for environmental governance will become even more out of line with what is regarded as good practice in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Most of these jurisdictions have some form of independent environmental protection agency.*' He added, '*With such large changes to our departmental structures being made in the very near future, I believe that now is the right time to revisit this debate.*' The Minister acknowledged however that he would need other political parties to give their support and commitment to make this (an EPA) happen.

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