

ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS, RESEARCH & ANALYSIS (ENRA)

NIEL's monthly roundup of the latest international research information and policy analysis relevant to Northern Ireland.



Agriculture



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Planning



*Sustainable
Development*



Transport



Woodland/Forestry



NIEL MEMBER RESEARCH & REPORTS

[The Rivers Trust launch new report revealing shocking state of our rivers](#)

The Rivers Trust has released its 2024 edition of the State of Our Rivers report, providing a comprehensive analysis of the health of rivers across Northern Ireland, Ireland, and Britain. This is the first occasion on which data from Northern Ireland and Ireland has been included in the report, reflecting the increasing membership and the range of project work being undertaken by the leading freshwater environmental charity on the island of Ireland. The new report features a case study of the causes and potential solutions to the blue-green algae pollution crisis of last year, which caused vast toxic algal blooms in Lough Neagh and is forecast to return this summer.

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Agriculture

[Agriculture 'core area' for EU's 2040 climate targets – Commission report](#)

By 2040, the EU's agricultural sector should be able to cut non-CO2 emissions by at least 30% compared to 2015 levels, with livestock and fertiliser use key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, a draft communication on the 2040 EU climate target states.

[Replacing animal-based foods with alternative proteins would unlock land for carbon removal](#)

Researchers report that replacing 50% of animal products with alternative proteins by 2050 could free up enough agricultural land to generate renewable energy equivalent in volume to today's coal-generated power while simultaneously removing substantial CO2 from the atmosphere.



Air Quality

[Prenatal Air Pollution Exposure Linked to Severe Newborn Respiratory Distress](#)

Prenatal exposure to air pollution increases the risk of severe respiratory distress in newborn babies, according to new research conducted at the Penn State College of Medicine in collaboration with the Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals (MIREC) Study led by Health Canada.

[Costs of industrial pollution from largest facilities decline in Europe but remain at 2% of EU GDP](#)

Air pollution from large European industry continues to cause significant damage to the environment, climate and people's health. However, according to an updated analysis by the European Environment Agency (EEA), the cost of this pollution has declined by about a third during the past decade. The analysis shows that just a small fraction of the most polluting facilities — many of them coal power plants - causes half of the total damage.



Biodiversity

[Progress on implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#)

This briefing, commissioned by the European Parliament's Environment Committee, provides an overview of developments to date on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). It describes milestones and timeline for implementation, and critical issues currently affecting discussions and progress prior to the next Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

[New analysis shows EU-UK divergence on environmental protection](#)

The interim findings of IEEP UK's two years of tracking how environmental policy in the EU, the UK and devolved nations is revealing increasing incidences of divergence, some which threaten to be consequential in their impact. The summary released ahead of the full report, highlights the following key areas of concern:

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- A gradual divergence on environment and climate policy has been taking place, both relative to the EU and across the four UK nations. This is often not clearly visible; it is often technical and complex in nature and difficult to assess.
- Generally speaking, the EU is forging ahead with a higher level of ambition by expanding and deepening its environmental policy and laws.
- Despite some progressive actions, the UK's level of ambition has not matched the EU's ambition since leaving the bloc. It has tended to move more slowly and taken a less stringent approach to regulation.
- The UK has 'flirted' with regressing from the environment and climate rules inherited after Brexit. From nutrient neutrality to the water framework directive to air pollution policy. The UK Government has shown a willingness to test the boundaries of what is arguably a case of regression as opposed to mere divergence in policy.
- Divergence often, but not always, has costs. Divergence in environmental policy can lead to increased friction and distortions to trade. Different types of standards, but particularly environmentally driven product standards, can lead to additional costs to business or the economy as a whole. Often UK companies will need to comply with EU standards as well.

[Ireland referred to Court of Justice for failing to adopt and notify penalties on invasive alien species](#)

Invasive alien species are one of the five major causes of biodiversity loss in Europe and worldwide. They are plants and animals that are introduced accidentally or deliberately as a result of human intervention into a natural environment where they are not normally found. They represent a major threat to native plants and animals causing an estimated damage of €12 billion per year to the European economy. Addressing them is an important aspect of the EU's aim to stop biodiversity loss as articulated in the European Green Deal and the European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.



Circular Economy

[Making the case for an EU resources law](#)

This new report suggests a new EU Material Resources Law, to tackle the excessive use and consumption of material resources and support the EU's Green Deal, climate change and circular economy objectives. A recently published report for OVAM, the Flemish Public Waste Agency, makes the case for an overarching Material Resources Law to be introduced at EU level. The report, drafted by TULIP Consulting and IEEP, suggests that the EU's excessive extraction, production, manufacturing and consumption of material resources needs to be explicitly addressed. EU consumption is currently around double the estimated sustainable level, and tackling this is necessary to support successful implementation of the EU's Green Deal, climate change targets and circular economy goals.



Climate Action

[New Innovative Tool Will Help Local Communities Adapt to Climate Change](#)

An innovative tool that gives individuals and teams the best available evidence in making decisions and identifying actions required to adapt to a changing climate has been launched. As the world

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warms, increased temperatures and extreme weather events have severe implications for services ranging from emergency services to highways maintenance and social care. Climate science is complex and hard to navigate and it can be difficult to understand implications for specific fields and how best to avoid the worst impacts. The tool makes the latest climate science accessible to decision makers allowing them to plan for the future to provide the best services possible in a changing landscape.

[NECPS: Paving a Bumpy Road Towards Climate Neutrality](#)

If Europe is to achieve its climate targets, then every European country must play its part. National Energy and Climate Plans are the blueprints where each EU country outlines how they intend to cut emissions. But are the plans up to scratch and what happens if they aren't? The EEB looks at agriculture, heating and public participation.



Economy

[Commission approves €2.9 billion French State aid scheme for supporting investment in green industries to foster the transition towards a net-zero economy](#)

The European Commission has approved a €2.9 billion French scheme for supporting investment in green industries to foster the transition towards a net-zero economy, in line with the Green Deal Industrial Plan. The scheme approved under the State aid Temporary Crisis and Transition Framework, adopted by the Commission in March 2023 and amended on 20 November 2023, to support measures in sectors which are crucial for accelerating the green transition and reducing fossil fuel dependencies.



Energy

[Energy Efficiency 101: A Little Guide For Big Savings](#)

In the symphony that is the energy transition, glamorous renewables take centre stage, often overshadowing one of the orchestra's main strings: energy efficiency. As winter is upon us, we dive into the five efficiency measures helping citizens slash fossil fuels, energy bills, and air pollution.



Environmental Justice

No new stories this month



Food

[Navigating Misinformation: The Raw Truth About Big Meat](#)

This year a lot has changed, but scientific reality has not: to halt the climate crisis, we must transform global food systems. One crucial dimension of this transformation is the role of animals in agriculture.

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By shifting to healthier, more sustainable diets, the benefits to farmers, farm workers, health, nature, and animal welfare would be enormous! So, what's preventing action?



Freshwater

[Spain referred to Court of Justice for failure to comply with Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive](#)

The European Commission decided to refer Spain to the Court of Justice of the European Union for its failure to fully comply with the collection and treatment obligations set in the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive. The Directive aims to protect people's health and the environment by requiring that urban waste water is collected and treated before discharge into the environment. Untreated waste water can put human health at risk and pollute lakes, rivers, soil, and coastal and groundwater.



Marine

[Rising Sea Levels Could Lead to More Methane Emitted from Wetlands](#)

As sea levels rise due to global warming, ecosystems are being altered. One small silver lining, scientists believed, was that the tidal wetlands found in estuaries might produce less methane – a potent greenhouse gas – as the increasing influx of seawater makes these habitats less hospitable to methane-producing microbes. However, research from biologists at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (Berkeley Lab) and UC Berkeley indicates that these assumptions aren't always true.

[Norway becomes first country to back deep-sea mining despite environmental concerns](#)

According to a study by the Environmental Justice Foundation published on the day of the vote, deep-sea mining is not needed for the clean energy transition. Norway has become the first country in the world to greenlight the controversial practice of deep-sea mining. A bill passed in the Norwegian Parliament will accelerate the undersea hunt for minerals needed to build green technology such as batteries for electric vehicles. It authorises opening up parts of the country's sea to mining exploration.



Planning

No new stories this month



Sustainable Development

[2024, a pivotal year for international cooperation on sustainable development](#)

2024 promises to be a year of preparation for the key milestones expected in 2025. In a tense and dynamic geopolitical context, with an unprecedented electoral agenda on a global scale, opportunities

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must be seized, at both international and national levels. This blog post identifies and analyses the main issues at stake in a year of transition crucial to the advancement of sustainable development.

**Transport**

No new stories this month

**Woodland/Forestry**[Diverse Forests Are Best at Standing up to Storms](#)

European forests with a greater diversity of tree species are more resilient to storms, according to new research published in Functional Ecology. A new study by researchers at the French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment reveals that in Europe, the forests that are most resilient to storms are those with a greater diversity of tree species and dominated by slow growing species with high wood density, like oaks.

[Rare Long-Term Analysis of Techniques for Creating Standing Dead Trees for Wildlife Habitat](#)

Ecologists have long known that standing dead trees, commonly referred to as snags, are an important habitat element for forest dwellers and act as a driver of biodiversity. They're so important that in some managed forests, snag creation is part of the conservation tool kit – i.e., crews sometimes convert a percentage of live trees into dead ones through techniques ranging from sawing off their tops to wounding their trunks to injecting them with disease-causing fungi. Until now, however, key questions had remained unanswered.