September 2026

The Green

HEALTHY RIVERS IRELAND



What if we could swim in all of Ireland's rivers?

"You cannot fake your way to a drinkable river. So the next time you're near a stream, river, lake or estuary, do the test. Can you drink from it? Could you swim in it without getting sick? If the answer is no – and it almost always is – then ask why we've allowed that to be normal and acceptable, and what urgently needs to change so that our waters are pure and safe again."

– Ella McSweeney, The Irish Times, 2026

What if Ireland's Rivers Were Swimmable?

Ireland has embraced sea swimming and it has become part of everyday life for thousands of people.



But what about swimming in Irish rivers? Imagine being able to walk or cycle to your local river and finding a perfect place to swim when you arrive. A swimmable river is about much more than swimming. It is a visible sign of cleaner water, healthier wildlife habitats and an improved amenity that people can enjoy.

Paris Shows What's Possible



For more than a century, swimming in the River Seine was prohibited because of pollution. Ahead of the 2024 Olympics, more than €1.4 billion was invested in improving water quality, including major upgrades to wastewater and stormwater infrastructure. In summer 2025, designated areas of the Seine opened for public swimming (City of Paris).

Swimmable Cities

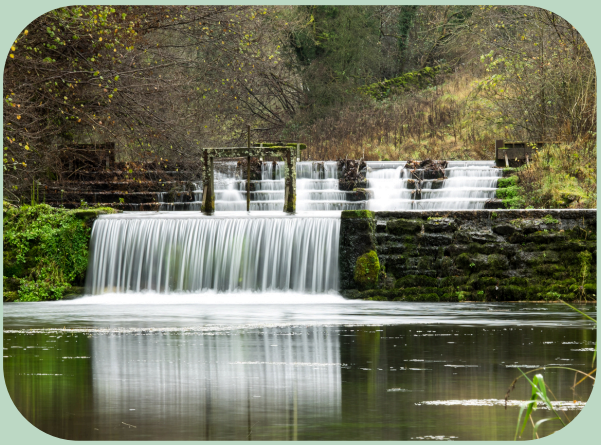
The swimmable cities movement is active in 80 cities, with momentum accelerated by the cleaning of the Seine for the 2024 Olympics. 'Paris is just one of many cities in Europe that have fought to make their waterways swimmable again. Copenhagen, Basel, Zurich, Bern and Oslo have all spent years improving their sewage management systems, creating stormwater infrastructure and implementing policies to better control water pollution' (National Geographic, Irish Times).

What's Stopping Us?

Making more of Ireland's rivers swimmable starts with tackling the pollution that is entering them.

According to the EPA, agriculture is the main source of pollution in Ireland's rivers and other waterways - lakes, estuaries and coastal waters. Pollutants such as excess nitrogen and phosphorus from artificial fertilisers and slurry (liquid manure) can wash or leach into rivers, lakes and groundwater.





Physical changes to river shape and flow through dredging, straightening and weirs add further pressure. Forestry activities can pollute with sediment and pesticides.

Poorly treated wastewater can release excess nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus (for example from human waste), organic pollution and harmful bacteria and chemicals into rivers, lakes and coastal waters.



DID YOU KNOW?

46% of Ireland's rivers are currently failing to meet their required environmental standards (EPA).

Healthy Farms. Healthy Rivers

Agriculture is central to Ireland's economy and rural communities. But with nearly three-quarters of Ireland's land used for farming, what happens on the land has a major impact on our water.

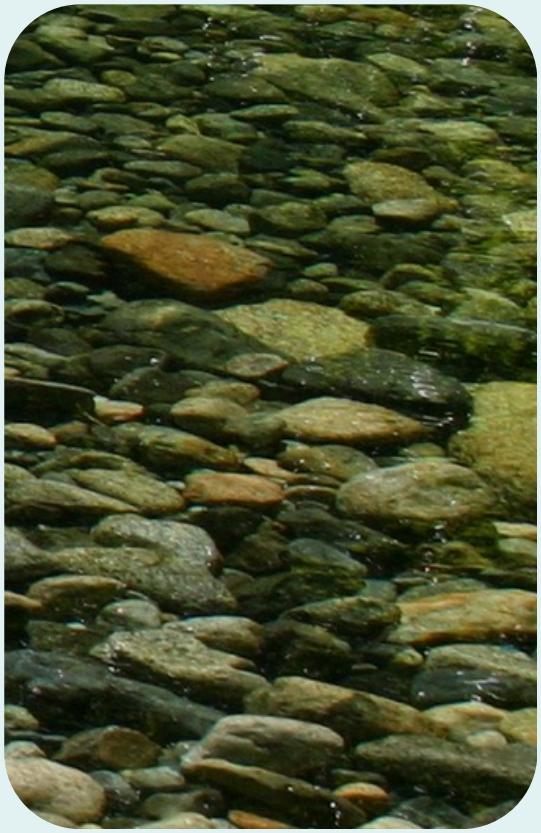
Nitrogen and phosphorus are essential for growing crops and grass. But when more of these nutrients are applied than plants and soils can retain, they end up in rivers, lakes and groundwater.

Too many nutrients encourage excessive algae and plant growth in rivers and ofher water bodies. As this material dies and decomposes, oxygen levels can fall, making it difficult or impossible for fish, insects and other aquatic life to survive.



Some Irish farmers are taking steps to protect waterways:

- Using soil testing and precision fertiliser application
- Improving slurry management and spreading methods
- Using clover to reduce reliance on artificial fertilisers
- Planting native trees and plants along riverbanks
- Fencing riverbanks to keep livestock away from rivers and streams
- Restoring wetlands that help capture excess nutrients and sediment.



Cattle Farming and the Nitrogen Factor

EU rules generally limit livestock manure application to 170kg of nitrogen per hectare per year.



Ireland is now an outlier, as the only EU country still having a special Nitrates Derogation, which allows eligible grassland farms to exceed this standard limit (Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine).

Under Ireland's Nitrates Derogation, eligible farms can exceed the standard EU limit of 170kg of livestock manure nitrogen per hectare, up to 220kg or 250kg per hectare, depending on the area, and subject to stricter environmental rules. Approximately 7,000 farmers currently avail of the derogation (gov.ie).

Nitrates in Drinking Water and Human Health

Research from Denmark has raised concerns about the potential health effects of nitrates in drinking water.



A large nationwide Danish study found an association between higher nitrate concentrations in drinking water and increased colorectal cancer risk (National Library of Medicine).

Agricultural activities, including the use of nitrogen fertilisers and manure, are important potential sources of nitrate contamination of groundwater.

The Wastewater Problem

Modern wastewater treatment has transformed public health and water quality. But Ireland's wastewater infrastructure still has serious problems.



15 towns and villages throughout Ireland still have raw sewage being released untreated into rivers, estuaries and coastal waters because they are not connected to wastewater treatment plants.

And having a treatment plant doesn't necessarily mean the problem is solved. EPA urban wastewater reports found that 59% of Uisce Éireann's treatment plants failed to consistently prevent pollution, allowing excessive nutrients and potentially harmful microorganisms into rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters.

Problems include ageing infrastructure, poor operational management including equipment failures, lack of staff training, inadequate equipment maintenance and storm overflows during heavy rainfall.



What can help?

- Upgrade wastewater infrastructure.
- Reduce sewage and stormwater overflows into rivers and coastal waters during heavy rainfall.
- Improve maintenance, monitoring and management of wastewater treatment facilities.
- Improve employee training.

Cleaner Water: Investment Works

The scale of the challenge is significant. But Ireland already has examples showing that investment can dramatically reduce pollution.

Cork Lower Harbour

A €144 million investment in Cork Lower Harbour transformed wastewater treatment, ending the equivalent of 40,000 wheelie bins of raw sewage entering the harbour every day. Wastewater from six surrounding towns is now fully treated before being safely discharged, significantly improving water quality and protecting Cork Harbour.



Cork Lower Harbour

Dublin's Ringsend

A €550 million upgrade to Ireland's largest wastewater treatment plant was completed in 2026. It now serves the equivalent of 2.4 million people and includes advanced nutrient-removal technology to help protect the Lower Liffey Estuary and Dublin Bay.



Dublin's Ringsend

So, Could Ireland Have More Swimmable Rivers?

Yes. But making a river swimmable is the end result, not the starting point. It means addressing the different pressures on the entire river system.



- **Reduce the use of nitrogen fertilisers**
- **Plant and protect riverbanks**, restore wetlands. Government support for farmers to diversify towards plant-based farming
- **Invest in removal** of obsolete dams and weirs
- **Modernise wastewater treatment:** Upgrade ageing plants, reduce sewage and storm overflows and improve nutrient removal
- **Protect our cleanest rivers:** Stop the decline of Ireland's remaining Blue Dot rivers, which have some of our highest water quality and support thriving and often endangered aquatic species



- **Restore damaged rivers:** Allow rivers space to function naturally rather than continually engineering them
- **Monitor our water:** Provide clear, accessible and up-to-date signs and information about water quality so communities know the status of their local river
- **Enforce the rules:** Stronger regulation, real enforcement and higher penalties for polluters are vital to protect Ireland’s waterways.

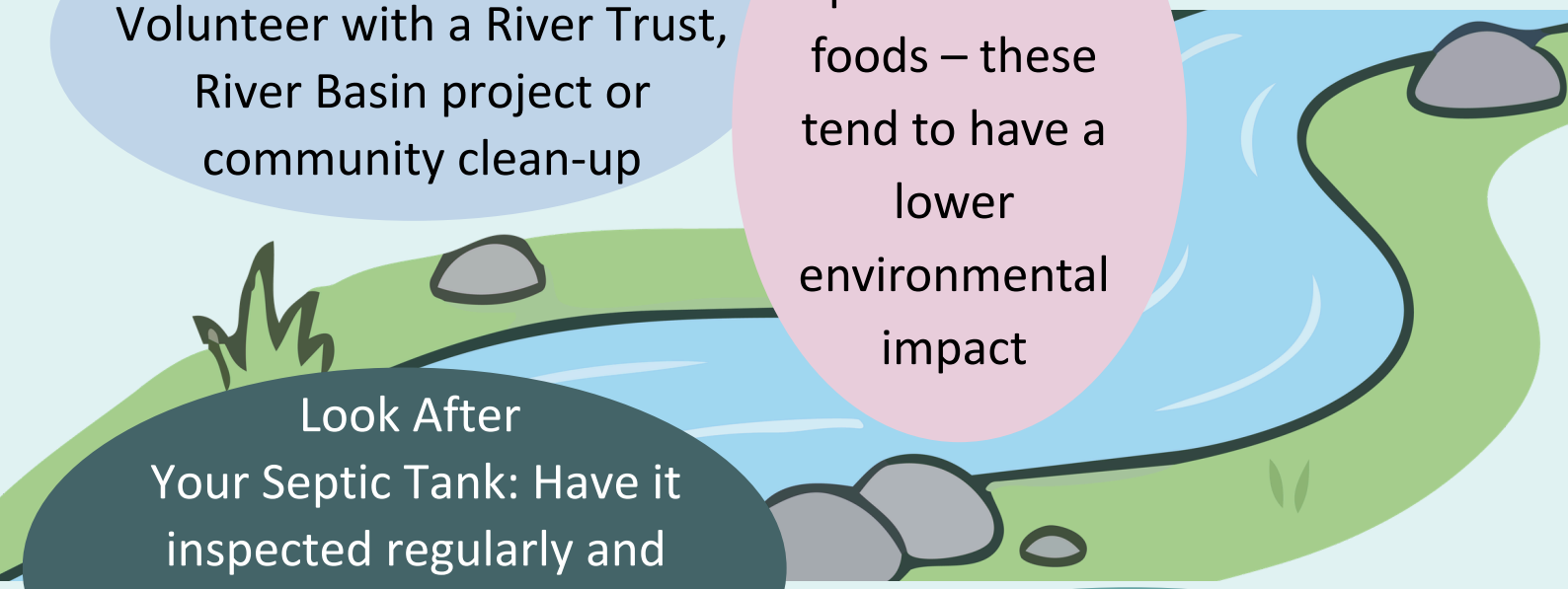
Ways to Support Rivers

Get to Know Your River: Find out where your local river starts, where it flows and what condition it is in. Catchments.ie provides maps and information about waterways throughout Ireland

Hold Polluters Accountable: Support stronger enforcement, meaningful fines and greater transparency around water quality

Join a Local River Group: Volunteer with a River Trust, River Basin project or community clean-up

Choose more plant-based foods – these tend to have a lower environmental impact



Look After Your Septic Tank: Have it inspected regularly and emptied every 2–3 years by an approved contractor

Keep Pollution Out: Never pour chemicals, oils, paints or medicines into drains or waterways

Speak Up for Rivers: Ask your TDs and councillors how they are protecting rivers and meeting Ireland's water quality targets

Support Nature-Friendly Farming: Support farmers and organisations working to protect soils, rivers and biodiversity

Learn More

Want to discover more about Ireland's rivers? These organisations and people provide excellent information, practical advice and ways to get involved.

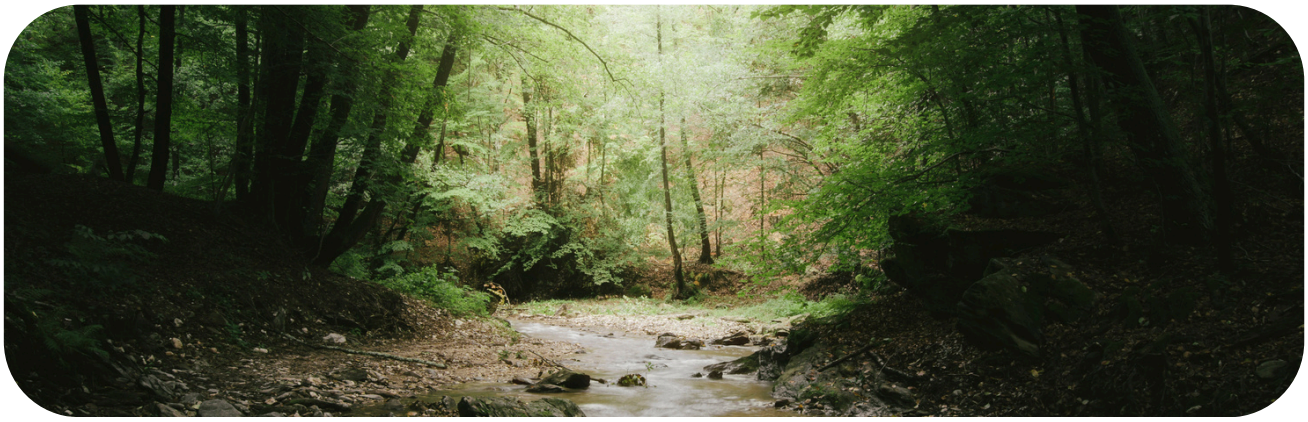
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Ireland's national authority for water quality monitoring, river health and the State of the Environment reports.
- River Basin (Previously LAWPRO Local Authority Waters Programme): Helping communities understand, protect and restore local rivers, lakes and wetlands.
- Inland Fisheries Ireland: Learn about Ireland's fisheries, river habitats, salmon conservation and catchment restoration.
- Catchments.ie: Ireland's Water Framework Directive website, bringing together the latest science, maps and information on our rivers and catchments.
- The Rivers Trust: Inspiring river restoration projects across the UK and Europe, with practical examples of how rivers can recover.
- Ella McSweeney, The Irish Times:
  - Ireland's plan to weaken legal protections for waterways will push many of them beyond recovery and
  - Is there an Irish river I can drink from without vomiting?



The Green Fridays newsletter is just the beginning.

Explore our carousels, guides, sources and practical actions at greenfridays.org/learn.

- Read this month's carousels
- Explore the science and sources
- Discover organisations making a difference
- Find ways to get involved



Have a great weekend!
The Green Fridays Team

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