CLEANER WATER: SWIMMABLE RIVERS

Green Fridays

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What’s Polluting Ireland’s Rivers?

- **Agriculture:** This is the main source of pollution in Ireland’s waterways. Excess nitrogen and phosphorus from chemical fertilisers and organic fertilisers such as slurry as well as pesticides and sediments from farms can enter waterways and contribute to algal growth, which can harm rivers and aquatic life (see our previous post).
- **Urban wastewater:** Poorly treated (sometimes untreated) wastewater releases nutrients like phosphorus, organic pollution and harmful microorganisms into rivers and other waterways.
- **Forestry:** Forestry operations can release sediment, nutrients and pesticides. Sediment is fine soil and other particles that can smother river habitats and fish spawning grounds.
- **Physical changes:** Drainage, straightening, dredging, embankments and weirs alter river flow, damage habitats and prevent fish movement.
- **Industry & other pressures:** Industry, urban run-off and other activities can affect water quality, while climate change adds pressure through changing rainfall, floods, drought and warmer water.



Source: EPA 1, EPA 2 and EPA 3

Wastewater: An Ongoing Challenge

Modern wastewater treatment offers major public health and environmental benefits. However, these systems are responsible for treating large quantities of waste (sewage) and do not always operate properly or remove enough nitrogen and phosphorus before discharging into waterways (epa.gov).

According to the EPA urban wastewater treatment reports that 59% of Uisce Éireann's treatment plants **failed** to consistently prevent pollution. As a result, excessive amounts of nutrients such as phosphorus, bacteria, viruses and other pollutants are entering rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters (RTE.ie).

Main reasons for urban wastewater treatment plant failures:

- Poor operational management including equipment breakdowns
- Inadequate equipment maintenance and lack of staff training.
- Ageing treatment plants
- Untreated storm overflows during heavy rainfall
- Poorly maintained private septic tanks.

(Source: allirelandsustainability.com - epa reports)



Did you know? 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.

Wastewater: An Ongoing Challenge

What can help?

- Upgrade ageing wastewater infrastructure and treatment plants to meet modern standards.
- Implement low-cost solutions, including improved operational management, regular equipment maintenance and better staff training.
- Reduce sewage and stormwater overflows into rivers and coastal waters during periods of heavy rainfall.
- Improve treatment of nutrients and pollutants before wastewater is discharged into rivers and other waters.
- Strengthen monitoring and maintenance so problems are identified and fixed quickly.
- Inspect and maintain septic tanks, particularly in areas where nearby water quality is failing environmental standards.



Sources: EPA • Uisce Éireann

Cleaner Water: Swimmable Rivers

When wastewater and other pollution are properly managed, rivers can become places where wildlife flourishes and where people can safely swim, paddle and spend time in nature.

For generations, many urban rivers across Europe were heavily polluted by sewage, industry and urban development. Today, cities are investing in wastewater treatment, sewer infrastructure and better water-quality monitoring to bring these rivers back to life.

Making a river swimmable is a powerful and very visible measure of progress. It turns something technical, like wastewater treatment, into a simple question everyone can understand: Is the water clean enough for people to swim in?



European Cities: Reclaiming Rivers

Swimming in Paris

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 the Seine's water quality, including major upgrades to wastewater and stormwater infrastructure (City of Paris). In summer 2025, designated areas of the Seine opened for public swimming.

Swimmable Cities movement

The Swimmable Cities movement is now active in 80 cities, with momentum accelerated by the cleaning of the Seine for the 2024 Paris Olympics. '*Paris is just one of many cities in Europe that has 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.'* As a result, there are now many European cities where people can swim in cleaner urban waters (National Geographic, Irish Times).



What If More of Ireland's Rivers Were Swimmable?

Ireland has embraced sea swimming. Could clean, accessible rivers become part of everyday life too?

Making more rivers safely swimmable would require many of the same actions needed to restore river health:

- Investment and focus on water quality to allow river swimming
- Better wastewater treatment
- Fewer sewage and storm overflow discharges
- Better monitoring and public information
- Less pollution entering rivers from surrounding land

The Real Test? Water company bosses should be willing to swim in the waters they are responsible for. (Count Binface, Clacton by-election, UK)



Investment in Wastewater Treatment

Cork Lower Harbour
A €144 million investment transformed wastewater treatment in Cork Lower Harbour. Before the project, the equivalent of 40,000 wheelie bins of raw sewage was discharged into the harbour every day. Today, wastewater from Cobh, Carrigaline, Passage West, Monkstown, Ringaskiddy and Crosshaven is collected and fully treated before safe discharge. This has significantly improved water quality and protected Cork Harbour.


Cork Lower Harbour

Ringsend Wastewater Treatment Plant
Completed in 2026, the €550 million upgrade to Ireland's largest wastewater treatment plant now serves the equivalent of 2.4 million people. The project introduced advanced nutrient removal technology, helping protect the Lower Liffey Estuary and Dublin Bay.

Sources: Uisce Éireann and RTÉ

Ireland's Highest Quality Rivers – How Many Are Left?

Ireland's cleanest rivers are known as Blue Dot Rivers or High Status waters. Some 334 river water bodies have a High Status Objective, meaning they should be protected at High Status or restored to it.

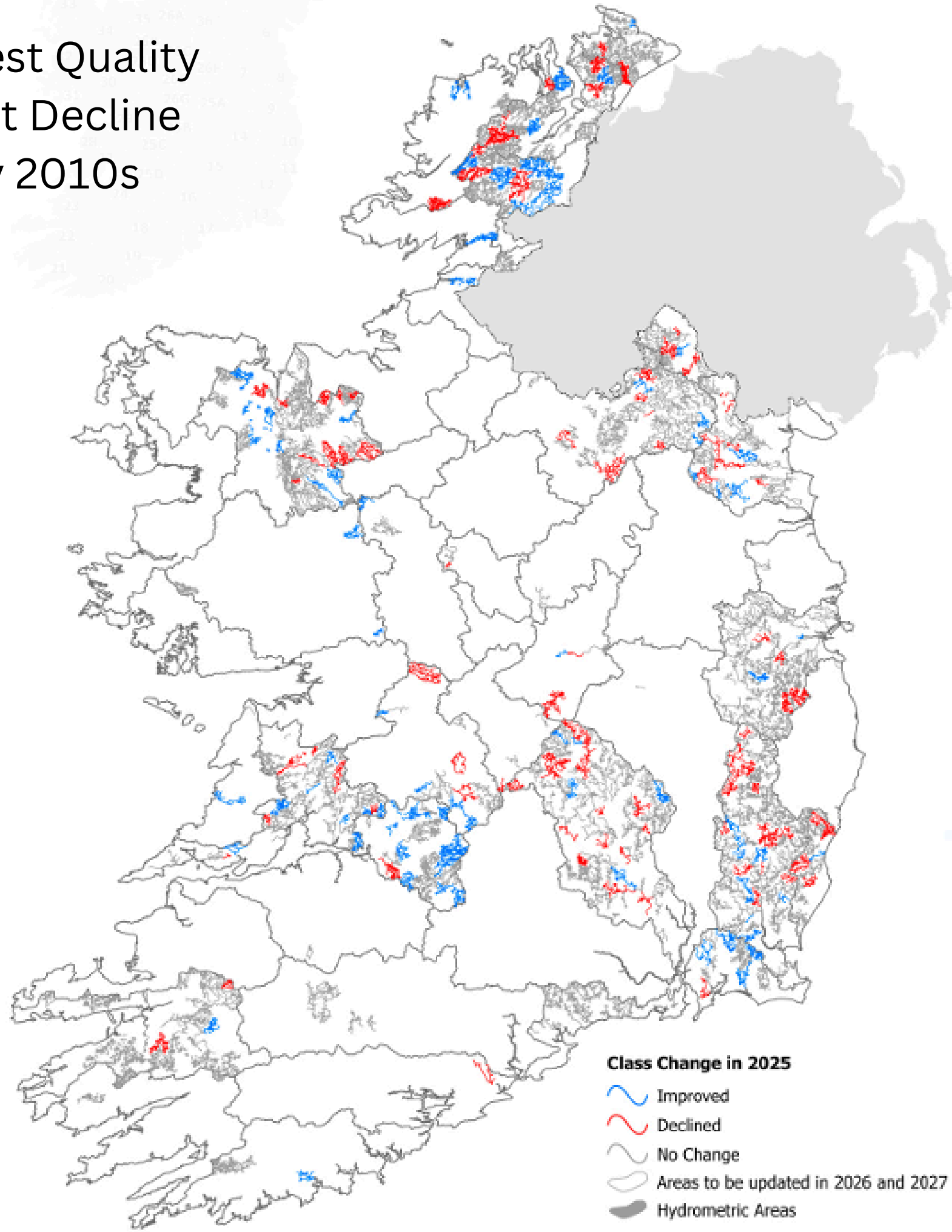
But the EPA's latest assessment shows that only 182 of these 334 rivers of Ireland’s best rivers achieved their required standards in 2023–2025. These standards are based around the quality and quantity of insect life in the rivers which are indicators of a river’s health and water quality.

And the trend is worrying: Ireland is losing even its most pristine rivers. In the 1980's there were over 500 rivers deemed to have the highest water quality and now only 20 of the best rivers remain.



Overall, the EPA reports a 25% net decline in high quality rivers in 2023–2025 compared with the 2010–2012 period.

Ireland’s Highest Quality Rivers: 25% Net Decline Since the Early 2010s (EPA.ie)



Source: EPA

What Needs to Happen Next?

- Continue investing in modern wastewater treatment, building on successful projects such as Cork Lower Harbour and Ringsend.
- Reduce untreated wastewater and storm overflow discharges into rivers and other waterways.
- Improve operational management and ensure better equipment maintenance.
- Ensure wastewater staff receive high-quality training.
- Improve removal of nitrogen and phosphorus before treated wastewater is discharged.
- Upgrade infrastructure to meet population growth and reduce pressure on existing treatment systems.
- Improve inspection and maintenance of septic tanks, particularly where waterways are at risk.
- Protect High Status rivers and sensitive catchments from wastewater pollution.
- Strengthen monitoring and regulation, and introduce meaningful fines for polluters.
- Give the EPA stronger powers to revoke licences for repeat offenders.



Sources: EPA • Uisce Éireann • LAWPRO • Catchments.ie • The Irish Times (Ella McSweeney)

Green Fridays Takeaway

Investment in cleaner water works. Modern wastewater treatment can reduce pollution, improve water quality and protect rivers, wildlife and .

Projects such as Cork Lower Harbour and Ringsend show what sustained investment can achieve. Continuing to upgrade Ireland's wastewater infrastructure is an important part of restoring our rivers.

Learn more, explore the sources and discover practical ways to help at GreenFridays.org/learn.

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