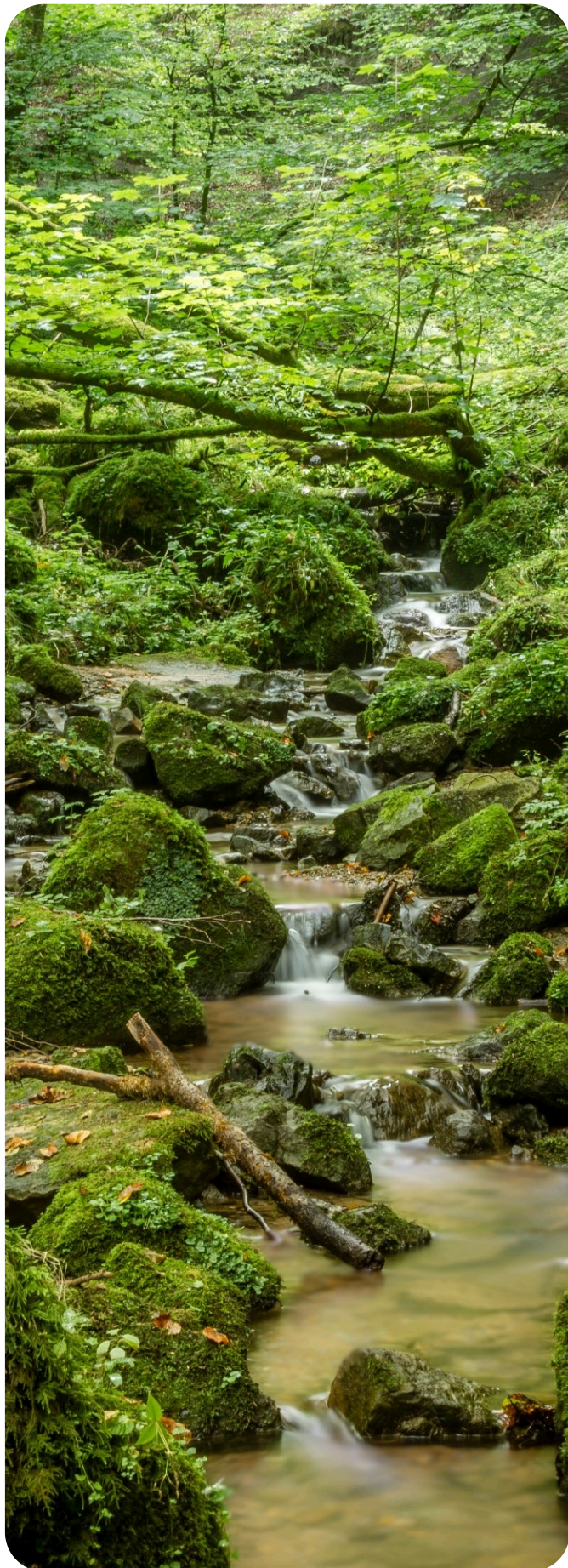


How are Ireland's Rivers Faring?



GreenFridays.org

Why Rivers Matter



Ireland's rivers are the veins of our landscapes. From mountain streams to winding lowland rivers, they provide drinking water, support wildlife, nourish wetlands, sustain farming and offer places to walk, swim, fish and connect with nature.

They connect our landscapes, carrying water, nutrients and wildlife from the mountains to our lakes, estuaries and eventually the sea.

Healthy rivers support healthy communities.

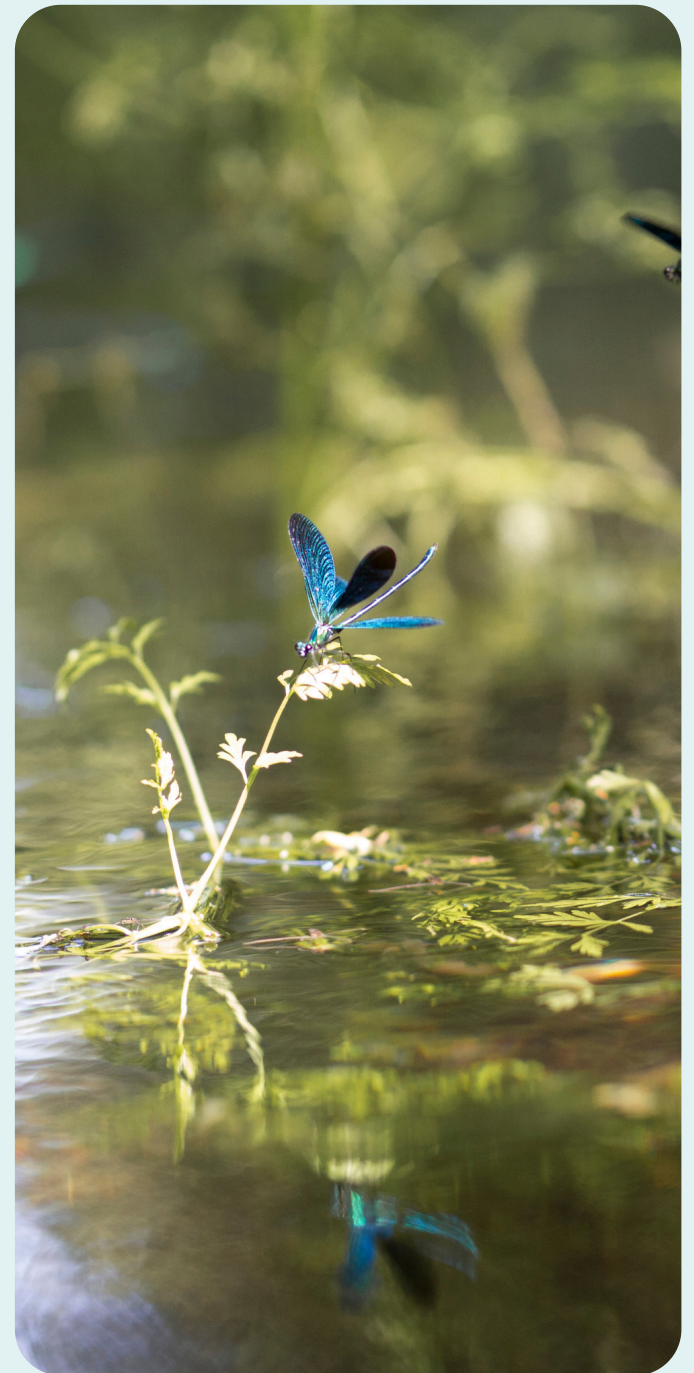
Ireland has more than 73,000 km of rivers and streams, from small headwaters (the source and upper part of stream) to broad estuaries. Around three-quarters are small streams, feeding into larger rivers and helping shape the catchments around us.

Source: [EPA](#)

What makes a Healthy River?

A healthy river is more than clean water. It is a living ecosystem that supports wildlife, communities and healthy landscapes. A healthy river should:

- Support biodiversity, providing habitat for fish, insects and other aquatic life.
- Flow naturally, with meanders, deeper pools and areas of both fast- and slow-moving water.
- Have native trees and plants along its banks to reduce erosion, filter pollutants, provide shade and support insects.
- Allow fish and wildlife to move freely, with few barriers such as dams or weirs.
- Remain connected to their floodplains, helping to store floodwater and support wildlife.
- Have clean, oxygen-rich water.
- Support aquatic insects including mayflies, caddisflies and stoneflies - indicators of good water quality.
- Have a varied riverbed of gravel and rocks providing habitat and spawning areas.



Sources: Inland Fisheries Ireland; EPA and [Conservation Foundation](#)

Irish River's Water Quality Continues to Decline

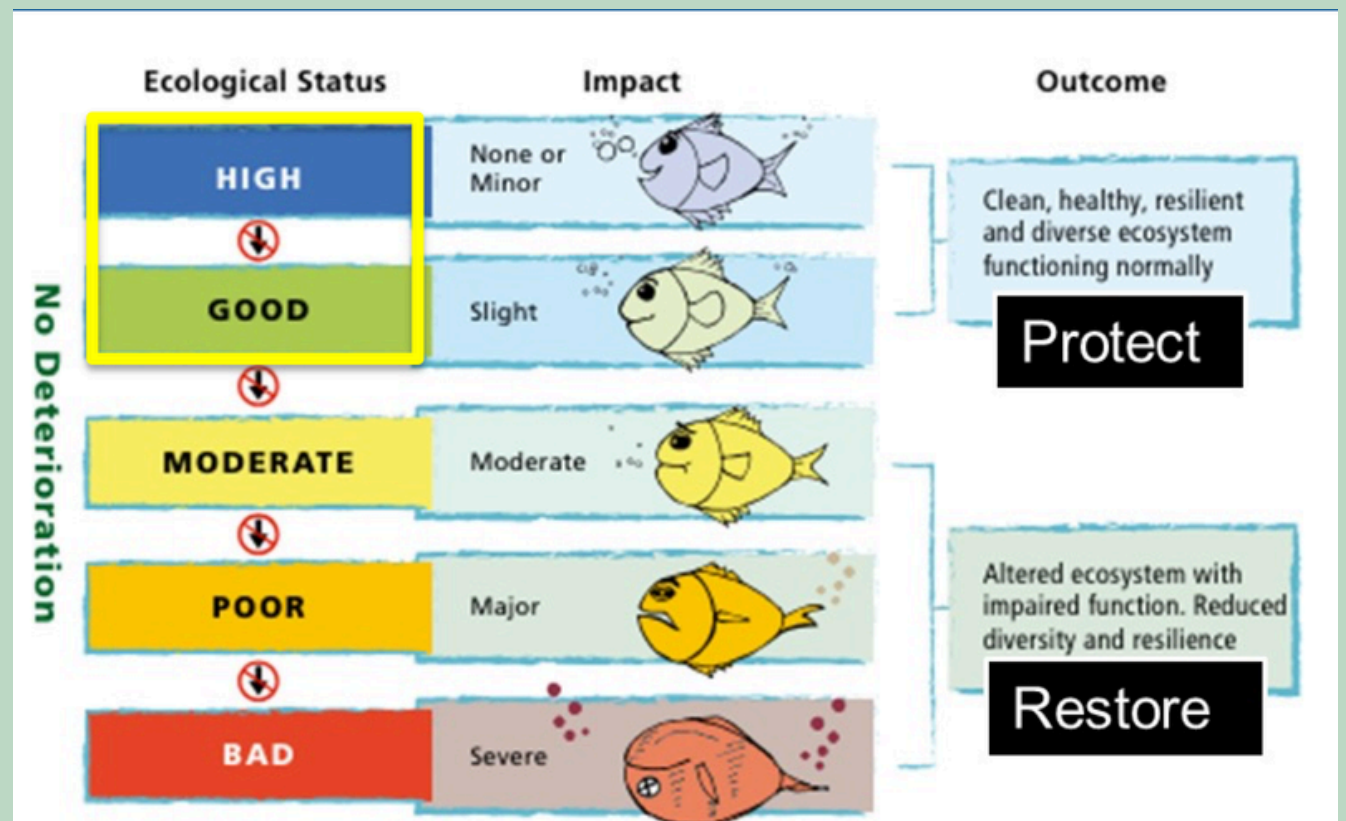
The latest EPA Water Quality Report (Data collected 2025, published June 2026) found no overall improvement in Ireland's river water quality. Only 54% of monitored river water bodies were in good or high ecological status meaning 46% of Ireland's monitored rivers are in need of restoration.

Of the 717 river water bodies assessed in the most recent report:

- 90 improved
- 109 declined
- 515 remained stable

Overall, this represents a **net loss of 19 river water bodies**.

The EPA also found that: Excess nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus from farming, poorly treated sewage facilities and run off from land remain the greatest challenges. When too much of these 'nutrients' get into rivers they can cause the loss of oxygen due to excessive algae growth (Catchments.ie)



Ireland: Losing Blue dots rivers

Ireland's cleanest rivers are known as High Status rivers (sometimes called Blue Dot waters). They have exceptionally high water quality and provide important habitats for sensitive freshwater wildlife.

These rivers are valuable because they act as reservoirs of biodiversity and provide a benchmark for what healthy river ecosystems should look like.

Today, only 145 out of Ireland's 334 Blue Dot rivers retain their High Status standard.

Did you know?

Around half of the European Union's remaining freshwater pearl mussels - they survive only in the cleanest waters - are found in Ireland. This dwindling species are in fact one of the 365 most endangered species in the world.

Many of the freshwater mussels are made up of ageing mussels with little or no successful reproduction, highlighting the importance of protecting the few clean rivers where they are reproducing.

Source: [EPA](#), [NPWS](#) (image), WetlandSurveys.



Five reasons why healthy rivers matter

Healthy rivers benefit people, wildlife and the economy:

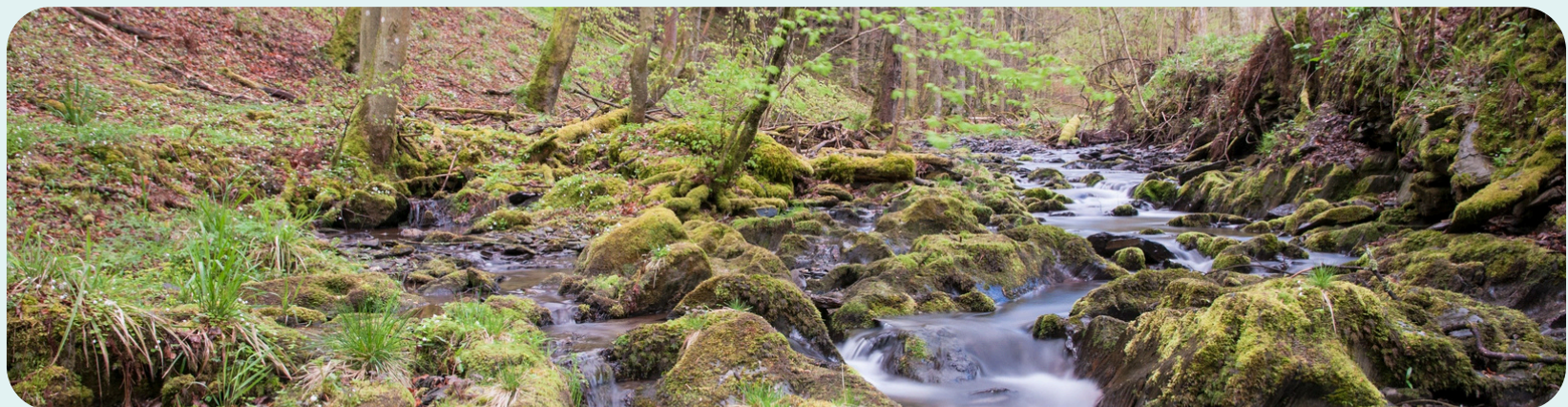
1. **Clean drinking water:** Protecting river catchments helps safeguard drinking water and reduces treatment costs.
2. **Wildlife and biodiversity:** High Status rivers support rare species and act as reservoirs of biodiversity.
3. **Reduced flood risk:** Natural rivers and connected floodplains slow the flow of water and help reduce flooding.
4. **Communities and recreation:** Rivers provide places for walking, swimming, angling and enjoying nature.
5. **Farming and healthy landscapes:** Healthy rivers provide clean water, support productive soils and help maintain resilient landscapes.



Government Action Needed

The Irish government needs to take measures to restore river health and water quality including:

- In the light of the most recent EPA water quality report the government should reconsider Ireland's nitrogen derogation (Ireland is the last EU state with this derogation).
- Provide better supports to the remaining 60 commercial vegetable growers in Ireland. Horticulture has a lower impact on Irish waterways than livestock farming.
- Address deficits in sewage and wastewater treatment facilities that are contributing to pollution in rivers, streams and the sea.
- Provide more funding for removing barriers such as weirs and dams, to allow Atlantic salmon, trout, eel and other species to reach their spawning grounds.
- Ensure adequate fines are imposed for river pollution 'events' such as fish kills.
- Additional monitoring and standards for septic tanks in private dwellings.



How You Can Help

Healthy rivers depend on governments, communities, farmers, businesses and individuals. Here are some ways to make a difference:

- Eat more plant-based foods, rather than dairy or beef products, which have higher climate and water quality impacts.
- Support nature-friendly food: supporting organic farmers and those using nature-friendly practices can help reduce pressure on rivers.
- Protect water at home: Avoid pouring oils, paints, medicines and harsh chemicals down household drains, and reduce pesticide and herbicide use.
- Maintain and regularly inspect septic tanks where applicable.
- Get involved locally: Learn about your local river, join clean-ups, record wildlife or take part in citizen science through organisations such as LAWPRO and local river groups.
- Support restoration projects: Many organisations are restoring rivers, wetlands and native oyster reefs, helping improve water quality and biodiversity.

Find out more:

- [LAWPRO](#)
- [Rivers Trusts Ireland](#)
- [Cuan Beo](#) (Galway Bay)
- [Green Ocean Foundation](#)



Sources: [LAWPRO](#) • [EPA](#) • [Catchments.ie](#) • [National Biodiversity Data Centre](#)

Green Fridays Takeaway

Healthy rivers provide clean water, support wildlife, reduce flooding and connect our landscapes.

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

Next in the Healthy Waters series:

Healthy Rivers – Life in Ireland's Rivers



THE GREEN ROUTE