

BY TOMMY GREENE

OUR WELL, OUR WATER

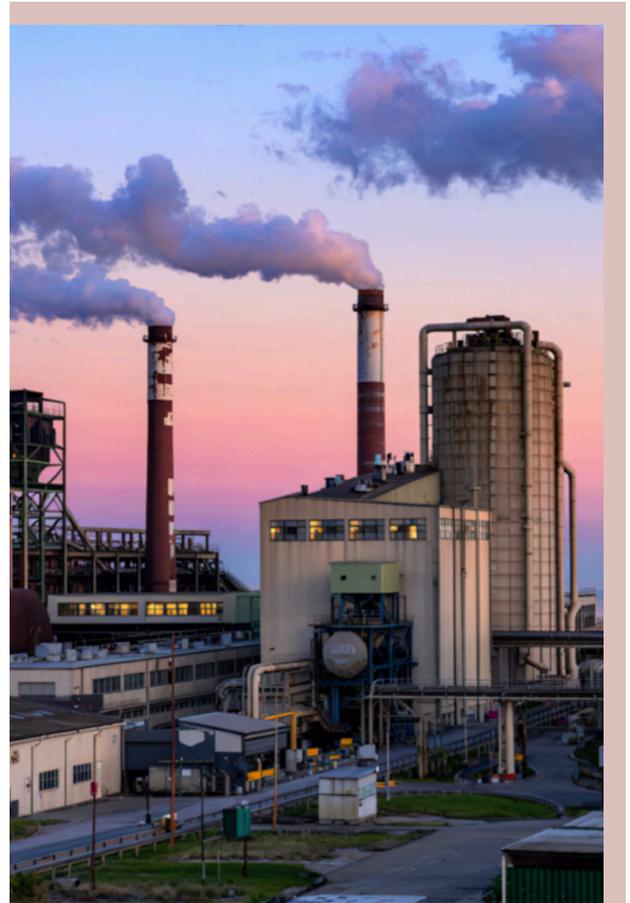
It may seem odd to think about water insecurity and even scarcity in a place like Ireland, so well-known for its ample rainfall.

Ireland's moderate climate means drought is rarely mentioned in public discourse, even with the sustained temperature rises brought about by global heating. Prolonged dry spells on the island were, however, recorded in 2025 and are predicted in some parts of neighbouring Britain this year.

Abundant supply of freshwater is, unsurprisingly, one of the reasons the booming tech industry has chosen to build so many of its controversial data centres in Ireland (mainly south of the border, to date). These facilities in the Irish Republic now consume more than 560bn litres of water a year, with that figure likely to reach 1.2 trillion litres by 2030.

Although the sector is considerably smaller in Northern Ireland, similar headaches may soon be on the horizon amid the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (which itself consumes vast quantities of water both to manufacture the hardware it runs on and to generate the electricity needed to power it). A 'super cluster' of prospective new data centres has recently been greenlit in the North West, including a number within a few miles of Derry city.

Digital infrastructure is of course not the only 21st-century industry that places large demands on our water supply. Even a number of self-described 'green' energy sources, including hydrogen-based and carbon capture technologies, require enormous volumes of water in order to generate power.



But it is a modern iteration of perhaps Ireland's oldest industry that is arguably placing most strain on water supply and aquatic ecosystems' health. Modern farming methods, which are increasingly mechanised and tend towards intensifying production, not only consume vast quantities of water – they also create serious waste management problems, the results of which are now visible every summer at major freshwater bodies across the island, from Lough Neagh to Lough Derg.

Globally, around 70% of freshwater withdrawals are for agricultural purposes. Ireland's heavy rainfall means farming places less pressure in relative terms on water sources where abstraction is concerned. The main headache for agriculture is waterway pollution, as waste disposal methods and the scale of production for an export-driven sector have increasingly come under the microscope after a decade of incentivised growth.

COMMERCIAL EEL FISHING COULD NOT, FOR INSTANCE, GO AHEAD LAST YEAR FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER AT LOUGH NEAGH



IRELAND AND BRITAIN ARE NOT, LIKE OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD, AT THE SHARPEST END OF ONGOING FALLOUT FROM WATER INSECURITY OR SCARCITY PRESSURES

Ireland and Britain are not, like other parts of the world, at the sharpest end of ongoing fallout from water insecurity or scarcity pressures – or, indeed, of the climate crisis, more broadly. But they are beginning to count the costs of poor water management decisions and the decades of neglect that informed them.



Commercial eel fishing could not, for instance, go ahead last year for the first time ever at Lough Neagh, following two other years' eel seasons where just a few weeks were managed by some fishers. Meanwhile, a shellfish industry worth millions to the local economy may also find itself threatened at Belfast Lough if politicians are unable to invest in the public network of wastewater treatment facilities surrounding the iconic 'sea lough'.

While agricultural runoff is feeding recurrent blue-green algal blooms and dangerous bacteria at waterbodies like Lough Neagh and Lough Erne, commercial and domestic wastewater – including raw human sewage – are the key drivers of pollution at Belfast Lough, around which a third of the North's population currently resides.



Scientists stress that, while climate change and invasive species are also driving the North's water pollution problems, remediative efforts need to focus on aspects of the crisis that can be tackled locally.

As with many areas of environmental and public health governance, managing water is complex and fraught with disputes waged by competing interests at the state level. **But, although some of the pressures on our water systems can seem immense, there are small yet significant actions we can take to help relieve some of those strains.**



As consumers, there are a number of significant choices available to us. Dietary changes, such as reducing meat intake, make a huge difference, but other actions like opting for phosphate-free washing detergents and household cleaning products can make a substantial difference too. They help reduce pressures on rivers and water bodies that have in recent years become a noxious pea-green soup due to excess nutrient inputs which ultimately leave these ecosystems in a sickened state, choking aquatic life in the process.



Although avoiding wasteful water usage may seem obvious – it appears to flow from our taps as if by magic in this part of the world, with major shortages a rarity – it is another step that we all can take.

As for taking precautions when using waterways for recreational purposes (such as swimming or watersports), there are some helpful rules of thumb.



AS FOR TAKING PRECAUTIONS WHEN USING WATERWAYS FOR RECREATIONAL PURPOSES (SUCH AS SWIMMING OR WATERSPORTS), THERE ARE SOME HELPFUL RULES OF THUMB.

One is not to enter bathing waters at any point directly after (usually, within 48 hours of) periods of heavy rainfall – during which the region’s creaking sewerage network exceeds capacity and considerable volumes of wastewater are, as a kind of safety valve measure to prevent sewage back-up in homes, released directly into rivers and coastal water bodies.

Data on water quality has historically been poor and still lags behind other regions in the UK and Ireland. But a recently-launched online tool, designed to advise the public on where to swim across 33 designated bathing sites in the North, is one example of growing digital resources available locally (although, please note: it is not real-time data, despite being described as a ‘dashboard’).

For many, however, the most powerful action citizens can take is collective. There is more scope now, arguably, than ever before to ensure water quality improvements and better management of our natural life support systems.

One obvious way of doing this may be to support or even spearhead campaigns that either spotlight these concerns or help keep them firmly on the political agenda. Restoring Lough Neagh is, after all, in this Stormont Executive’s [Programme for Government](#).

The upcoming Assembly Election may prove to be an advent for waterway health – with the lough’s plight both a symbol of and setting for these broader struggles – becoming a major electoral issue. Voters and campaigners have the power to make this a watershed moment.