# Northern Ireland government and Ulster Farmers’ Union clash over new water quality regulations



A recent clash has emerged between the Northern Irish government and the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU) over proposed measures aimed at improving water quality in the region. Agriculture and Environment Minister Andrew Muir launched a public consultation on the latest Nutrients Action Programme (NAP), designed to combat the declining health of waterways in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to pollution from agricultural sources.

In response to the proposals, the UFU quickly dismissed them as “deeply unbalanced, unfair and disconnected from the reality of farming.” UFU president William Irvine articulated the farmers’ concerns, stating that the measures “lean heavily towards enforcement and regulation” and would introduce “extra red tape.” This reaction came just hours after Muir announced the consultation aimed at mitigating the effects of slurry and other nutrient-rich fertilisers contributing to rising phosphorus levels in local lakes and rivers.

According to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Daera), farms currently account for approximately 62% of high phosphorus levels that are detrimental to water quality. Muir highlighted that, while wastewater treatment also contributes significantly to this issue, it is vital that all sectors participate in addressing the problem.

The latest NAP, which builds on principles set out two decades ago, seeks to implement new measures based on scientific research. Muir noted that previous improvements in water quality have been overshadowed by intensifying agricultural practices. He expressed disappointment over the UFU’s quick dismissal of the consultation, labelling their response a “knee-jerk reaction.”

Irvine contended that farmers have been working to improve water quality for years and called for a balanced approach that reflects the practical realities they face. He stated, “We fully recognise the need to protect and improve water quality, but it must be done in a way that’s balanced, fair and grounded in the day-to-day realities of farming in Northern Ireland.”

Muir's comments align with a broader environmental initiative, explicating that stronger regulation and enforcement are necessary to confront the environmental crisis facing Lough Neagh. He urged stakeholders to engage deeply with the consultation process, considering the proposals thoughtfully.

His remarks indirectly referenced comments made by Dame Glenys Stacey, chair of the Office of Environmental Protection, who recently warned that the agri-food industry is placing unsustainable demands on the environment. Muir asserted that the crisis cannot merely be resolved through education or incentives, underscoring the need for a robust regulatory framework to effect meaningful change.

As the consultation progresses, both the government and agricultural community appear poised for further discussions aimed at reconciling differing views on how best to uphold and improve water quality in Northern Ireland.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ufuni.org/farmers-must-be-aware-of-nutrient-action-programme-rules/> - The Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU) urges farmers to familiarize themselves with the Nutrient Action Programme (NAP) rules to ensure compliance and protect the environment. The UFU emphasizes the importance of understanding these regulations to maintain eligibility for payments and safeguard water quality.
* <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/nutrients-action-programme> - The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) outlines the Nitrates Directive and its implementation in Northern Ireland, aiming to improve water quality by protecting against pollution from agricultural sources. The NAP regulations are detailed, including compliance requirements for farmers to adhere to the 170 kg nitrogen per hectare per year limit.
* <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/nutrients-action-programme-implementation-report-2020-2023> - DAERA produces a report every four years on the status of water quality and the impact of the action programme on water quality and agricultural practices. The report for 2020 to 2023 was completed in 2024, providing insights into the effectiveness of the NAP in improving water quality.
* <https://thedetail.tv/articles/phosphorus-pollution-from-northern-ireland-farms-more-than-double-sustainable-level> - An investigation reveals that farms in Northern Ireland are producing more than double the sustainable level of polluting phosphorus. The article highlights the environmental impact of agricultural practices on water quality, particularly concerning phosphorus levels in waterways.
* <https://www.farminguk.com/news/ni-farmers-urged-to-follow-nutrients-action-programme-rules_64017.html> - Farmers in Northern Ireland are urged to adhere to the NAP requirements to ensure compliance and protect the environment. The article discusses updated restrictions for spreading slurry in February and early October, emphasizing the importance of following these rules to maintain water quality.
* <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/agricultural-nutrients-and-water-quality> - The DAERA's publication summarizes the evidence on the impact of agricultural nutrients on water quality, drawing from monitoring and technical reports up to the end of 2020. The document provides insights into the effectiveness of the NAP in improving water quality.
* <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/agriculture-minister-andrew-muir-accuses-ufu-of-knee-jerk-reaction-to-latest-water-quality-improvement-plan-VB24DVYEJJHX5OJMVTZMNTRAQY/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data