# Northern Ireland’s Lough Neagh faces urgent action as heatwave fuels blue-green algae crisis



As summer approaches, the weather patterns in Northern Ireland remain a topic of much discussion and concern. Recently, Environment Minister Andrew Muir articulated a sentiment that resonates with many: the desire for a respite from intense heat, especially given the challenges posed by climate conditions. Just weeks after expressing his preferences, a heatwave gripped the region, highlighting the unpredictability of weather and its implications for local ecosystems.

Muir’s caution regarding hot, sunny spells is particularly pertinent considering the ongoing environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. This largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland has been severely affected by blue-green algae blooms, which thrive in warm weather. These noxious algae not only compromise the lake's water quality, crucial for drinking water and recreational activities, but also pose a significant risk to local wildlife and habitats. The situation has become increasingly dire, with Muir acknowledging the need for “difficult interventions” to address the root causes, which include agricultural runoff—a consequence of nitrogen and phosphorus leaching into the water—and climate change.

In a recent meeting with the Earl of Shaftesbury, Muir expressed a commitment to securing Lough Neagh’s long-term future. As part of a broader strategy, he outlined 20 actionable steps aimed at improving water quality and mitigating the proliferation of blue-green algae. These initiatives, part of the Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan, were already underway and did not require formal Executive endorsement, reflecting the urgency with which they must be pursued.

Acknowledging the lake’s significance, Muir has emphasised that it supplies around 40% of Northern Ireland’s drinking water and supports vital activities such as eel fishing. However, his calls for prioritising funding and resource allocation faced challenges, underscoring the often precarious balance of governmental budgets and environmental priorities. It is a delicate task, balancing economic needs with ecological sustainability, especially as stakeholders from farming communities have expressed concerns over the impact of water quality issues on agricultural viability.

The introduction of the Lough Neagh: Blue-Green Algae Small Business Research Initiative is a more recent development aimed at addressing these challenges. With an investment of £450,000, the initiative seeks to develop innovative solutions that not only tackle the algae crisis but also offer insights into restoring ecological health. The outcomes could potentially extend beyond Lough Neagh, providing valuable strategies for similar areas adversely affected by algae blooms.

As political leaders and community stakeholders converge on the topic, it is clear that while Northern Ireland grapples with the immediate impacts of climate variability, a longer-term vision is needed to safeguard its natural resources. Muir’s emerging plans signal a recognition of these complex challenges, but their successful implementation depends on continued collaboration, public engagement, and perhaps most critically, securing the necessary investment to foster a sustainable future for both Lough Neagh and the communities that rely on it.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/frank-mitchell/we-need-rain-but-another-heatwave-during-july-and-august-would-be-quite-a-treat/a1211523816.html), [[2]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/03/27/difficult-interventions-needed-to-address-lough-neagh-crisis-warns-stormont-minister/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/03/27/difficult-interventions-needed-to-address-lough-neagh-crisis-warns-stormont-minister/), [[3]](https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2024/07/17/earl-pledges-to-work-with-stormont-to-secure-long-term-future-of-lough-neagh/), [[4]](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/muir-takes-action-water-quality-and-lough-neagh)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-stormont-environment-minister-andrew-muir-urges-officials-to-prioritise-clean-up-QCA4PDQ4YJB3ZJ5D3CI4UWLUXU/), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp6840k1y22o)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-08-05/how-to-solve-nis-toxic-algae-problem)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://m.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/frank-mitchell/we-need-rain-but-another-heatwave-during-july-and-august-would-be-quite-a-treat/a1211523816.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishtimes.com/environment/2024/03/27/difficult-interventions-needed-to-address-lough-neagh-crisis-warns-stormont-minister/> - In March 2024, Northern Ireland's Environment Minister, Andrew Muir, acknowledged the need for 'difficult interventions' to address the environmental crisis at Lough Neagh. The crisis, characterized by noxious blue-green algae blooms, was attributed to factors such as agricultural runoff containing nitrogen and phosphorus, the spread of invasive zebra mussels, and climate change. Muir emphasized the urgency of implementing measures to prevent the recurrence of these harmful blooms in the coming summer months.
3. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2024/07/17/earl-pledges-to-work-with-stormont-to-secure-long-term-future-of-lough-neagh/> - In July 2024, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Nicholas Ashley-Cooper, met with Northern Ireland's Environment Minister, Andrew Muir, to discuss the ongoing environmental issues at Lough Neagh. The meeting focused on collaborative efforts to secure the lake's long-term future, particularly in light of recurring blue-green algae blooms. Both parties expressed a commitment to working together to address the challenges facing the largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland.
4. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/muir-takes-action-water-quality-and-lough-neagh> - In July 2024, Minister Andrew Muir announced 20 actions aimed at improving water quality and addressing challenges in Lough Neagh, including tackling blue-green algae. These measures, part of the wider Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan, were already underway and did not require Executive approval. Muir emphasized the importance of Lough Neagh, noting its role in supplying 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water and its significance to local businesses and recreational activities.
5. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/lough-neagh-stormont-environment-minister-andrew-muir-urges-officials-to-prioritise-clean-up-QCA4PDQ4YJB3ZJ5D3CI4UWLUXU/> - In May 2024, Environment Minister Andrew Muir urged officials to prioritize efforts to tackle environmental problems in Lough Neagh. He expressed disappointment over the budget allocation for the lake, highlighting the need for reallocation of resources within his department. Lough Neagh, the largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland, supplies 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water and supports a major eel-fishing industry. Noxious blue-green algae blooms had affected large parts of the lake in the previous summer.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp6840k1y22o> - In July 2024, groups including farming representatives welcomed the Lough Neagh Action Plan as a 'good start' after discussions with Environment Minister Andrew Muir. The plan, approved by the Executive, outlines 37 actions to address challenges facing Lough Neagh, the largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland. Minister Muir emphasized the need for unprecedented effort to implement the plan and signaled his intention to pursue the creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency for Northern Ireland.
7. <https://www.itv.com/news/utv/2024-08-05/how-to-solve-nis-toxic-algae-problem> - In August 2024, a £450,000 initiative was launched to explore solutions to tackle the blue-green algae crisis at Lough Neagh. Environment Minister Andrew Muir announced the Lough Neagh: Blue-Green Algae Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI), aiming to develop concepts to address the algae problem. The initiative sought to find sustainable solutions to return Lough Neagh to its ecological state and hoped to apply successful solutions to other areas affected by noxious blooms.