# Andrew Muir faces backlash over stricter farm pollution controls in Northern Ireland



Agriculture and Environment Minister Andrew Muir is facing a growing backlash against his proposals designed to mitigate farm pollution in Northern Ireland's waterways, particularly in Lough Neagh. As he works towards implementing a revised nitrates action plan, Muir's initiatives are intended to tackle the environmental impact stemming from agricultural practices, which he asserts contribute 62% of the pollution affecting the region. This claim has prompted significant pushback from key figures within the agricultural community.

Notably, Declan McAleer of Sinn Féin has dismissed the minister's plan as "unworkable," reflecting a broader sentiment of resistance among farmers who feel their livelihoods are under threat. Similarly, Lord Tom Elliott, a former Ulster Unionist leader, has accused Muir of engaging in a "direct confrontation" with the agricultural sector rather than pursuing a cooperative approach. The tension is palpable, as many farmers perceive these proposed measures not only as stringent but also as disconnected from their realities, potentially endangering their operations.

Muir's strategy includes proposals to restrict chemical phosphorus fertiliser usage and to enforce a "farm phosphorus balance limit," particularly for intensive farming operations. Additionally, he aims to mandate the use of low emission slurry spreading equipment by 2030. This equipment, the minister contends, will not only enhance nutrient efficiency in slurry but also help to mitigate adverse environmental impacts.

A consultation period has been extended for four weeks, during which Muir has invited stakeholders to present alternative suggestions or new scientific insights. He wants to emphasise that “no decisions have been taken,” aiming for a collaborative reform process. This call for engagement is complemented by an announcement of at least £40 million in support funds earmarked for farmers to facilitate their adaptation to these new measures.

However, the agriculture minister finds himself navigating a treacherous political landscape. Opposition to Muir’s reforms has been fuelled by the implementation of the "Going for Growth" strategy, which has intensified livestock production. This has been linked to worsening water quality in local ecosystems, evidenced by the toxic blue-green algae blooms that have plagued Lough Neagh in recent summers. The Nike Blue Algae phenomena, a direct consequence of eutrophication attributed to farming practices, exemplifies the immediate need for remedial action.

Muir’s proposals have found support among environmental groups. Northern Ireland Environment Link framed the plans as an essential starting point for preserving the region's freshwater ecosystems. Ulster Wildlife echoed these concerns, noting that many of the waterways in Northern Ireland are overwhelmed with chemicals and sewage, making natural recovery highly unlikely.

Despite these endorsements, McAleer pointedly remarked that the proposed timelines could undermine many farmers, potentially forcing them to reduce livestock numbers or expand their landholdings. The backlash is not limited to farmers alone; environmentalists have expressed frustration over the lack of immediate measures to increase penalties for agricultural pollution breaches. Although Minister Muir has indicated that he is contemplating the issue of penalties, no changes to current sanctions are anticipated until a comprehensive review is completed in 2026.

Adding to the complexity, the prosecution rate for agricultural pollution incidents has been dismally low. Between 2015 and 2023, only 49 prosecutions were pursued out of 1,821 reported incidents, illustrating a lack of accountability within the sector. This ineffectual enforcement has led to calls for a more robust environmental governance framework, prompting Muir to consider establishing an independent environmental protection agency to enhance oversight and public trust.

As discussions continue, Muir's challenge remains clear: balancing the necessity for environmental protection with the needs of a vital sector that, at least to some, feels unduly burdened. In the face of growing resistance, how successfully he navigates this tightrope may determine the future of agriculture and environmental health in Northern Ireland.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/22/pollution-plan-must-cut-intensive-farming-for-lough-neagh-to-survive)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[2]](https://www.agriland.co.uk/farming-news/agriculture-the-principal-cause-of-pollution-in-lough-erne/), [[4]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/agriculture-minister-andrew-muir-accuses-ufu-of-knee-jerk-reaction-to-latest-water-quality-improvement-plan-VB24DVYEJJHX5OJMVTZMNTRAQY/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[5]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/disappointment-as-minister-rules-out-immediate-increase-in-agricultural-pollution-penalties-WPWAIBHTOJEZFEWVXS4OQQMWH4/), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/less-than-3-of-farm-pollution-incidents-prosecuted-A7CCZOKTMJD2HBFKPRMC2DTIQE/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[2]](https://www.agriland.co.uk/farming-news/agriculture-the-principal-cause-of-pollution-in-lough-erne/), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clygp9xe086o)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[4]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/agriculture-minister-andrew-muir-accuses-ufu-of-knee-jerk-reaction-to-latest-water-quality-improvement-plan-VB24DVYEJJHX5OJMVTZMNTRAQY/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/22/pollution-plan-must-cut-intensive-farming-for-lough-neagh-to-survive), [[6]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/less-than-3-of-farm-pollution-incidents-prosecuted-A7CCZOKTMJD2HBFKPRMC2DTIQE/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clygp9xe086o)

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/politics/agriculture-and-environment-minister-facing-growing-resistance-to-farm-pollution-reduction-proposals-J6YBLY57EFBKNLFHEYPGANGNH4/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.agriland.co.uk/farming-news/agriculture-the-principal-cause-of-pollution-in-lough-erne/> - Agriculture has been identified as the primary source of pollution in Lough Erne, accounting for approximately 44% of confirmed pollution incidents over the past five years. This is followed by industry at 16% and Northern Ireland Water at 12%. Additionally, agricultural sources are responsible for about 63% of medium and high-severity incidents in the Lough Erne catchment area. These statistics were provided by Minister of Justice Naomi Long during a debate on pollution in Lough Erne, highlighting the significant impact of agricultural activities on water quality in the region.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/22/pollution-plan-must-cut-intensive-farming-for-lough-neagh-to-survive> - An action plan has been agreed upon by the Northern Ireland Executive to address pollution in Lough Neagh. The strategy includes various farming support measures aimed at reducing pollution pressures across the lake's catchment area. However, 17 out of the plan's 37 measures could not be implemented prior to the summer break due to opposition from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), particularly concerning proposals related to farming and environmental penalties. The plan also includes real-time water quality monitoring and a pilot programme for buffer zones and tree planting around the banks to limit contamination input.
4. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/agriculture-minister-andrew-muir-accuses-ufu-of-knee-jerk-reaction-to-latest-water-quality-improvement-plan-VB24DVYEJJHX5OJMVTZMNTRAQY/> - Agriculture and Environment Minister Andrew Muir has accused the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU) of a 'knee-jerk reaction' to proposals aimed at improving water quality. The UFU dismissed the proposals as 'deeply unbalanced, unfair and disconnected from the reality of farming'. The proposals include new measures developed based on scientific research, forming part of the Lough Neagh action plan. The UFU president, William Irvine, stated that farmers have been implementing measures to improve water quality for the past 20 years and that the proposals reflect a disconnect with local agriculture.
5. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/disappointment-as-minister-rules-out-immediate-increase-in-agricultural-pollution-penalties-WPWAIBHTOJEZFEWVXS4OQQMWH4/> - Environmentalists have expressed disappointment after Agriculture Minister Andrew Muir confirmed there are no immediate plans to increase sanctions against farmers who pollute waterways. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) stated that Muir is 'currently considering' the issue of penalties for breaches of cross-compliance regulations. Despite widespread problems around water quality linked to agricultural pollution, no immediate changes to the regime are expected. The current cross-compliance regime is due to be replaced in 2026 with a new set of standards, which will include a 'new, simplified and more effective penalty system'.
6. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/less-than-3-of-farm-pollution-incidents-prosecuted-A7CCZOKTMJD2HBFKPRMC2DTIQE/> - Between 2015 and 2023, only 49 prosecutions were brought by Northern Ireland’s authorities over slurry spills and other farming-related water pollution incidents, representing approximately 2.5% of recorded agriculture-related water pollution incidents. In total, there were 1,821 such incidents recorded by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) during this period. The disclosures come amid controversy over a Stormont vote to bring back a 15% cap on penalties for repeat agricultural pollution offenders. Campaigners have criticised the low prosecution rate, stating that it lacks a deterrent for polluting farmers.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clygp9xe086o> - A panel of experts has been appointed by Environment Minister Andrew Muir to consider options for creating an independent environmental protection agency in Northern Ireland. This initiative aims to strengthen environmental governance and address growing public concerns over the pollution of Northern Ireland's waterways. The move comes more than a year after Lough Neagh, the UK's largest freshwater lake, turned green due to the growth of toxic blue-green algae, largely attributed to agricultural pollution from fertiliser run-off.