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The Development of the Priorities and Policy Programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026

What should Ireland choose as the high-level thematic priorities for its Presidency of the Council in 2026?

We, the Irish Wildlife Trust, support the Environmental Pillars 'Resilience' proposal as the main theme for the Irish Presidency of the Council. This theme is cross cutting across many different aspects of society. In terms of conservation and the environment, resilience is something we must strive for in the face of climate change and global uncertainty. The EU Strategic Agenda states, 'Our natural environment is facing increasing damage and disruption due to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution'. It is vital that we work towards achieving EU and international targets for nature conservation and restoration if we are to ensure resilient ecosystems. The Irish Wildlife Trust's vision is an Ireland where wild nature thrives and society enjoys the benefits of coexisting with diverse, functioning ecosystems. Having resilience as a key high level priority behind the work of the Irish Presidency of the Council will help progress strong, transformative and ambitious work at EU level to help protect people and the environment.

Which particular policy areas and legislative proposals should be a focus of work for the Irish Presidency of the Council in 2026? What should the Irish Presidency aim to achieve in these areas?

Our key ask for the Irish presidency is that representatives will ensure a strong line against the weakening of environmental and climate laws through the simplification



agendas. Many files will be reviewed through omnibus packages and while we agree that streamlining administrative burden is good, this cannot come at the expense of environmental targets. 'Competitiveness' is a term used at EU level in regards to business and the economy. However, without ensuring that there are healthy soils, clean rivers, resilient native forests and effectively protected oceans with sustainable fish populations, there will be no economic competitiveness. If these ecosystems continue to degrade, food security and the economy will also suffer. The EU Strategic Agenda states, 'We will continue to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems, including oceans. We will strengthen water resilience across the Union.' Ireland should take this opportunity to increase efforts across the EU to implement measures that will protect and restore the environment.

There are several legislative acts and revisions due next year. One key one will be the EU Ocean Act. This aims to bring together ocean related targets under one legislative framework. Good Environmental Status (GES), the target for 2020, has not been achieved in any of Europe's regional seas. This failure is not a result of insufficient ambition but of fragmented governance, poor implementation and slack enforcement. The Irish presidency's primary role will not be one of advocating but we ask that you help to advance a progressive outcome for this file. This file should **encompass all existing EU and international targets and objectives** relating to the ocean including the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD), Marine Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), Nature Restoration Regulation and the Birds and Habitats Directives. It must have binding legal targets for 2030, 2040 and 2050. It's vital to embed the ecosystem based approach and a non deterioration principle as well as strengthening enforcement of management and improving transparency. The revision of the MSFD should also be undertaken alongside a revision of the MSPD in order to achieve the goals of the Ocean Act. The MSFD has the environmental targets we need to reach to achieve GES and the MSPD has the planning mechanisms needed to achieve this, however these two pieces of legislation are not coherently linked. Ecosystem based marine spatial planning is non-negotiable to achieve GES.

If the CFP is reopened, we ask that a focus is kept on ensuring environmental and social justice provisions within it are strengthened and not weakened. There are many valuable environmental aspects of the CFP which have been largely unimplemented across EU



Member States. Article 17 should be made stronger to ensure small scale fishing communities receive greater shares of the available quota and proven environmentally friendly methods are incentivised.

Any other comments

It should be a priority of the Irish Government to ensure its compliance with EU laws and directives ahead of its presidency. This would show a commitment to rule of law in the European Union. The Commission recently released guidance on managing fishing activities in Natura 2000 sites. Currently very few Fisheries Nature Declarations are active in protected sites at sea, despite Ireland's seascape being over 7 times the size of its land mass. Any activity that could impact on the conservation objectives of a site should have full assessments completed. Fishing communities that may have to change certain methods of fishing should be supported economically and socially to transition to more sustainable alternatives.

Ireland has been promising a national MPA Bill for many years and we are still waiting for the Heads of Bill to be released. Having this national law approved ahead of the presidency will help show Ireland's commitment to lead on maritime policy which was stated by the Taoiseach at the United Nations Ocean Conference in June 2025. The Bill should have provisions to ensure 10% of our marine area is strictly protected to align with the EU Biodiversity Strategy. Many other EU countries have committed to reaching this target including Spain and Denmark and it's important for Ireland to show ambition on this ahead of the presidency.

The MPA Bill will also be a vital piece of legislation to help ensure Ireland reaches its marine restoration targets for the Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR). Ireland was a vocal champion during the dialogue negotiations for the NRR both at Parliament and Council level. Ensuring an ambitious national restoration plan that doesn't lean on derogations is vital for Ireland to maintain its credibility. National restoration plans are due to be submitted to the Commission during the Irish presidency and Ireland has a real chance to lead by example. The next biodiversity COP will happen in Armenia during the Irish presidency and all eyes will be on what actions Ireland has taken to adhere to



European and international targets and ensure healthy ecosystems for future generations.

Le meas,

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