Response to the Consultation on Proposals for the Management of Ireland's Wild Atlantic Salmon Fisheries from 2027

30th October 2026

1. Introduction

The Irish Wildlife Trust (IWT) welcomes the review of Ireland's Salmon Management Framework by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) and the opportunity to contribute to proposals for the management of Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon fisheries from 2027. The decline of wild Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) is a stark indication of the wider ecological crisis affecting Ireland's rivers, catchments and marine environment. Salmon are a keystone and indicator species, connecting freshwater and marine ecosystems through their extraordinary migratory life cycle. Their survival depends on the health and connectivity of the wider ecosystems through which they travel.

We believe the recovery of wild salmon populations must be approached as part of a river-rewilding approach to salmon recovery, prioritising the restoration of natural river processes, the removal of barriers to migration, the recovery of native riparian woodland and wetlands, and the restoration of connected, functioning catchments. Rewilding rivers means restoring natural processes and giving rivers the freedom to function as dynamic living and evolving ecosystems. This includes reconnecting rivers with their floodplains, restoring more natural flows and sediment movement, restoring riverside vegetation and removing obsolete infrastructure wherever possible. These measures can restore habitats and benefit a wide range of species, not just salmon.

Ireland already has examples of practical restoration such as in the Boyne catchment which has included the restoration of more than 18 kilometres of salmon spawning and nursery habitat and barrier mitigation projects in Wicklow have reopened habitat for migratory fish. These initiatives are a start but we believe a more ambitious and integrated approach is needed to restore entire river systems.

2. A precautionary approach to fisheries management

We support the recommendations of Salmon Watch Ireland, concerning river-by-river management, reduced exploitation and greater protection of spawning stocks. These measures must happen alongside the restoration of the ecosystems on which salmon depend.

3. Rewilding rivers: restoring natural processes and connectivity

The IWT considers river rewilding a priority for long-term salmon recovery. Many Irish rivers have been substantially altered through drainage, channelisation, barriers and other modifications

intended to control water or maximise the use of surrounding land. These interventions can simplify river habitats, disconnect floodplains and wetlands, and prevent fish from reaching suitable spawning and nursery grounds.

Healthy rivers require space for natural processes. Their ecological value lies in the interconnected network of tributaries, wetlands, floodplains, riparian vegetation and surrounding land. Ireland has already begun addressing barriers to fish migration through IFI's National Barriers Mitigation Programme. In May 2025, IFI announced a funding scheme aimed at removing or mitigating 257 barriers over three years. This is a welcome step towards restoring river connectivity.

River rewilding can contribute to climate change resilience. Rewilding measures can support cooler waters, improve water retention and reduce the vulnerability of rivers to extreme weather.

Recommendations

- Accelerate the identification and removal of obsolete dams, weirs and other barriers where feasible, and address barriers that prevent or impede the upstream and downstream migration of salmon.
- Where barriers cannot be removed, ensure that effective passage measures are implemented and their success is monitored.
- Restore natural river morphology including re-meandering artificially straightened channels and restoring natural sediment processes.
- Reconnect rivers with their floodplains and adjacent wetlands, allowing rivers to function more naturally and improving habitat diversity and water retention.
- Secure adequate funding for long-term restoration, maintenance and ecological monitoring.
- River restoration should prioritise the removal of pressures and the recovery of natural processes wherever possible.

4. Riparian woodland and forestry

The IWT believes that the protection and restoration of headwater streams and riparian habitats must be a central element of salmon recovery. Headwaters are an integral part of river ecosystems and degradation in the upper reaches of a catchment can have consequences throughout the river system.Commercial forestry puts significant pressure on water bodies through sediment and nutrient losses and acidification. The EPA has identified forestry as a pressure affecting hundreds of water bodies, poorly managed forestry activities causing substantial declines in water quality. Historical afforestation on peat soils and in sensitive uplands, sometimes without adequate water setbacks, has contributed to pressures that must now be addressed through restoration and improved management.

Restoring native riparian woodland and protecting intact habitats should be objectives of salmon recovery. Native riparian woodland plays an important role in regulating water temperature

through shade, stabilising riverbanks and providing a natural buffer against nutrient and sediment runoff. Fallen wood can also create habitat.

Recommendations

- Protect sensitive upland catchments from activities that would further degrade their ecological condition.
- Establish and restore native riparian woodland along salmon rivers and their tributaries, using locally appropriate native species and allowing natural regeneration wherever suitable.
- Review forestry operations within salmon catchments to identify and address risks from sedimentation, acidification, drainage, nutrient loss and changes to river flows.

5. Water quality and pollution

Pollution remains a major obstacle to the recovery of Ireland's wild salmon populations. Agricultural nutrient and sediment losses and other sources of pollution can damage spawning grounds and degrade freshwater habitats. Salmon management cannot be separated from the implementation of the Water Framework Directive and the achievement of good ecological status in Irish waters. The continued failure of water bodies to meet their ecological objectives undermines efforts to conserve salmon and other freshwater biodiversity. The IWT calls for stronger implementation and enforcement of existing environmental protections, alongside measures that address pollution at source.

Recommendations

- Ensure that salmon management is explicitly linked to the achievement of Water Framework Directive objectives and the restoration of degraded water bodies.
- Strengthen measures to address agricultural nutrient losses, sediment runoff, wastewater pollution and other significant pressures identified at catchment level, including the non extension of the Nitrates Derogation.
- Ensure adequate resources for monitoring, compliance, enforcement and the prosecution of serious environmental offences.

6. Aquaculture

The IWT is concerned about the impacts that open-net salmon aquaculture can have on wild salmon populations, particularly through sea lice, disease transmission and the escape of farmed fish. The protection and recovery of wild salmon must be a primary consideration in decisions affecting aquaculture in sensitive marine and freshwater environments.

7. Priorities for 2027 and beyond

The IWT calls for the management framework introduced from 2027 to establish a clear pathway towards the long-term recovery of wild salmon and their habitats. While some measures can be implemented immediately, the restoration of rivers and catchments will require sustained investment and coordination across government.

Immediate priorities for 2027

- Apply precautionary fisheries management and ensure that vulnerable salmon stocks receive appropriate protection.
- Accelerate barrier mitigation and identify opportunities for the removal of obsolete structures.
- Identify urgent pollution and habitat pressures requiring enforcement, remediation or immediate management changes.
- Protect existing riparian woodland, wetlands, spawning grounds and other critical habitats from further degradation.

Medium- to long-term priorities

- Develop and implement catchment-scale river rewilding and salmon recovery plans.
- Restore natural river processes, floodplain connectivity, riparian woodland and wetlands.
- Address the legacy of damaging land drainage and forestry practices in sensitive catchments.
- Secure sustained funding and establish clear responsibilities for implementation across relevant departments and public bodies.

11. Conclusion

The decline of Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon reflects the condition of the rivers, catchments and marine ecosystems on which the species depends. The IWT welcomes the review of Ireland's Salmon Management Framework and supports a precautionary approach to the management of exploitation. However, the proposed measures must extend beyond fisheries restrictions to address the underlying causes of salmon decline. Ireland must move towards restoring the ecosystems that can sustain their recovery. This requires a commitment to rewilding rivers, restoring natural processes, reconnecting fragmented habitats, restoring native riparian woodland, improving water quality, and addressing pressures arising from forestry and aquaculture. By restoring the natural functioning of our rivers and catchments, Ireland can create the conditions for wild salmon to thrive once again. The IWT calls on the Government and relevant public bodies to ensure that the management of Ireland's wild salmon fisheries from 2027 is supported by an ambitious, adequately funded and coordinated programme of river and catchment restoration.