

Environmental challenges

THE ENVIRONMENTAL Protection Agency (EPA) is not among those State agencies that fail to justify their existence or, in its case, the very significant increase in funding it received last year. Its latest report on the state of Ireland's environment, now officially billed by the agency itself as "an asset under threat", is not only breathtakingly comprehensive in its scope but also refreshingly forthright in documenting the nature of the threats to our air, water, habitats and climate.

According to the EPA, there are four key environmental challenges facing Ireland: limiting and adapting to climate change; reversing environmental degradation, particularly in relation to water pollution and the conservation status of habitats; "mainstreaming" environmental considerations across all sectors of the economy; and complying with environmental legislation and agreements. None of these will be easy to achieve, as the report makes clear. Indeed, some may well be impossible without the adoption of radical new policies. Yet we need to start "making headway" in that direction, as EPA director general Dr Mary Kelly said in her statement on the publication of Ireland's Environment 2008. With several important pieces of EU legislation due to come into force over the next few years, we simply do not have the time to put it on the long finger.

The EU Water Framework Directive, for example, requires that all rivers and lakes must be of at least "good" status by 2015. Given that nearly 30 per cent of Ireland's river length is polluted to some extent and that at least one of the culprits – agricultural effluent – is a recidivist offender, it will not be an easy task to comply with this directive. Nor will it be a simple matter to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, which account for a disproportionately high share (27.7 per cent) of Ireland's total. Combined with soaring emissions from the transport sector – up by 170 per cent between 1990 and 2006 – this explains why our per capita emissions are among the highest in Europe.

Rising to this challenge is not exclusively a governmental matter. As the Minister, John Gormley, said yesterday: "If we want a sustainable environment, and consequently a sustainable economy, it will require the concerted effort of all in Ireland, from our largest businesses to our youngest citizens in the classrooms across the country." And as Dr Kelly noted, the public do respond when given the necessary information and supports. The EPA's latest report is an important contribution towards telling us what we all need to know.