IRISH PEATLAND CONSERVATION COUNCIL

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Re: River Basin Management Plan 2018 - 2021 (draft)
Amended submission from the IPCC

Thank you for giving the Irish Peatland Conservation Council the opportunity to voice our concerns on the proposed River Basin Management Plan.

The Irish Peatland Conservation Council (IPCC) was established in 1982 and has 35 years of experience in peatland conservation. Our aim is to conserve a representative sample of intact peatlands. Only 18% of Ireland's original range of peatland habitats are deemed worthy of conservation. 82% have become degraded from multiple pressures such as peat extraction, forestry and habitat fragmentation.

Our work is guided by our 6th Action Plan, *Ireland's Peatland Conservation Action Plan 2020,* which was published in 2009. A copy of this document is available for download on our website at www.ipcc.ie. Many of the actions in our plan have been included within the *National Peatlands Strategy* which has been adopted by every Government Department and Local Authority. We would also draw your attention to this document to ensure its requirements are met within the 2nd cycle of the River Basin Management Plan. The National Peatlands Strategy can be downloaded from www.npws.ie.

The nature of a peatland is controlled by hydrological processes. Its existence depends on retaining water and its characteristics depend on the origin, volume, chemical quality and variability of water supply. The dominant flow processes in rain fed peatlands are over or close to the surface. Water moves fastest over a bare peat surface and is slowed by friction over a *Sphagnum* dominated peatland. Key drivers of change in peatland hydrology are climate, land use and inputs of nutrients and pollutants from the atmosphere or external water sources. Peatlands form major catchments for surface water supply reservoirs across the uplands of Ireland. Increasing dissolved organic carbon (DOC) and associated discolouration of water has been identified as the largest change in upland water quality over the last 30 years (www.uplandhydrology.org.uk). Impacts on water treatment costs are significant, in addition to implications for carbon export from the peatland system and for aquatic flora and fauna. IPCC believe that the River Basin Management Plan for Ireland provides an important opportunity to address and tackle the sustainable management of peatlands within water catchments and our comments below are directed at strengthening the RBMP.

Peatlands in Ireland

The Republic of Ireland contains 1.2 million hectares of peatlands (Malone & O'Connell, 2009) or 16% of the land surface of Ireland. There are three main types including fens, raised bogs and blanket bogs. These are groundwater dependent habitats. These peatlands have a direct impact on water quality and also have a major influence on the river basin districts.

Peatlands are utilised in a variety of ways that can have deleterious consequences for thier ecological functioning and the supply of good quality water feeding into the catchment systems. Grazing, dumping, afforestation, industrial peat extraction, private mechanical turbary, construction of wind/solar farms and the associated drainage alter the role of peatlands within catchments.

Section 7.4 Addressing pressures from the harvesting of peatlands - the IPC License System
In relation to industrial peat extraction the RBMP(draft) recognises that suspended solids and high ammonia content released during a peatland drainage process is having an effect on 10% of water bodies determined to be at risk of not meeting their ecological status. The impression given within the plan is that the Environmental Protection Agency's licensing system deals with this and that this is not a problem. However there are 52 other Irish peat production companies that do not fall under the licensing system e.g. Bulrush Peat Production Company, Westland Horticulture, Erin Horticulture Ltd, Erin Group, Peatland Composts Limited and Klasmann-Dielmann (Foss, O'Connell & Crushell, 2005). The other 52 companies are not under EPA monitoring and should be incorporated into the new licensing system. At present their activities are currently controlled directly by the planning system.

Furthermore, the new (draft) IPC regulations remove power from the planning system to regulate extraction developments by those who have a license and place it under the remit of the Enviromental Protection Agency's IPC licensing system at a threshold of 30ha. There is evidence to suggest that the IPC license is not a robust method to control extraction and ultimately water courses. For example the Cloonroosk case in Co. Kildare in which IPCC had direct involvement and more recently Mostrim Bog which An Taisce made public. Cloonroosk was an intact remnant that was noted for being one of the most eastern examples of raised bog habitat. Bord na Mona dug 1m deep ditches every 9m and drained the site for horticultural peat moss which covered an area of 50ha (with the organic peat sediment flowing into the River Barrow). There was confusion as to whether this broke planning laws or whether Bord na Mona are exempt because they hold an Intergrated Pollution Prevention License for the lands within which the development took place. IPCC found that the latter was the case. After a meeting with the EPA it was also noted by the IPCC that the EPA could not effectively regulate and monitor all extractions as there were only 3 inspectors on the ground actively monitoring within the country. Furthermore there was no consultation on the Ballydermott Works Rehabilitation Plan which contained the Cloonroosk site despite IPCC's name being used as a consultee. This document had been submitted to the EPA and effectively blinded them as to the potential for the company to extract peat at a harmful level without any control. The Mostrim Bog case in County Longford occured in 2016 when Klaasman Deilmann Ltd drained an intact raised bog remnant consisting of 41ha on behalf of Bord na Mona. The company was prosecuted under Section 40 of the Wildlife Act for the destruction of habitat supporting important bird species but it was little more than a slap on the wrist and a donation to the poor box. There was nothing about any potential damage to water courses.

These cases highlight the inadequacy of current laws to regulate extraction upon which the (draft) RBMP is relying. The RBMP needs to give consideration to the adequacy of the new stringent laws as they actually remove the planning requirements for areas above 30ha while areas below this threshold fall under local authority planning. The IPCC feel that 30ha is too large an area as 358 peatland sites within the IPCC's sites database are below this size and as such do not fall under the necessity of the IPC license, which is also voluntary in nature. The IPCC know of a case in County Kildare where a person is being prosecuted by Kildare County Council for draining and affecting an area of over 0.1ha without proper planning. This seems to be a nonsense given that the IPC license system allows a company to develop an area of 30ha or more without planning. There is concern within some eNGOs that the EPA have not been awarded enough resources to manage the IPC licensing system. It makes more sense to strenghten existing planning regulations already in place to reduce the pressure on the water network. The so called "streamlining" of regulations within the RBMP fails to address this. There should be one unified regulatory system for all extraction and there should be adequate resources made available to monitor and prosecute illegal developments.
This should be addressed within Section 7.4.1 of the River Basin Management Plan.

Section 7.4 Turbary
Traditional turbary has been responsible for the loss of 470,247 ha of raised and blanket bogs which equates to a loss of 40% of the original area of peatlands in the Republic of Ireland and has been completely ommitted as an issue in the RBMP draft. The Irish Peatland Conservation Council's Site Database lists 318 sites damaged by private mechanical cutting and 186 sites damaged by hand cutting. There is no regulation of domestic turbary extraction and the effect it has on water quality has not been quantified. The National Peatland Strategy has no actions to tackle this issue either. The IPCC would ask for investigative research to be carried out to quantify the effect on the catchments and the River Basin Management Plan should incorporate this into it's list of actions within Section 7.4.2.

Section 7.1, 7.3 & 7.8 Upland Blanket Bogs & Water Quality

Interference with the hydrology of upland blanket bogs (e.g. through over-grazing, afforestation, wind farm and associated developments and drainage) has been seen to be significant in the vast majority of peat failures (F. Renou-Wilson et al, 2011). There is evidence to suggest that there is a higher propensity for flash flood events in catchment areas where there is a higher density of eroded and cut-over blanket peatlands (O'Connor, 2000). As the bog starts to dry and lose its ability to store water, the surface patterning features change and allow a faster water run-off. This can have dire consequences as rapid run-off of water with high sedimentation load are deleterious to water quality especially in sensitive salmonid rivers (O'Conner, 2000). Upland blanket bogs are not adequatley addressed within the current draft of the RBMP and there should be more focus on these habitats and their potential to cause water quality issues within Sections 7.1, 7.3 and 7.8 as they are an important source for water within Ireland's catchment systems.

Table 1:- No. of peatland sites of conservation importance within the Republic of Ireland that have been damaged by water pollution. Source: IPCC Sites Database 2009

Habitat	No. of sites
Fen	55
Raised bog	11
Blanket bog	1
Total	67

Section 4.7.5 Water Dependant Habitats - Nutrient Pollution

Excess phosphates and nitrates can enter peatlands from neighbouring forestry, agriculture and urban polluted ground water sources. Fens (a peatland habitat) are particularly vulnerable to pollution from excess nutrients stored within groundwater as fens commonly occur in more intensely managed landscapes. Specifically in relation to fens monitored by the IPCC, we note that water pollution as being a problem on 55 sites of conservation importance (See Table 1). This was highlighted by a recent survey of wetlands in County Monaghan by Wetland Surveys Ireland (www.wetlandsurveysireland.com) where the factors causing the disturbance were noted as being the intensive management of the land surrounding the fens for silage production and run-off from cattle grazing. Within the Irish Peatland Conservation Council's Sites Database 43 Special Areas of Conservation have been classed as receiving pressure/under threat from water pollution. This is 10% of the total number of SACs designated in Ireland (www.npws.ie/protected-sites/sac). Section 4.7.5 within the River Basin Management Plan underestimates the issue of nutrient pollution of peatlands and should include new proposals that explain how to bring education to the urban, forestry and agricultural sector so as to increase awareness of the issue.

General Remarks

BOGLAND:

There has been valuable research funded by the Environmental Protection Agency on the issues surrounding the sustainable use of peatlands in Ireland. Actions - 3. Management of peatlands for water (MPW) within the BOGLAND report states as the first recommendation that it should be ensured that peatlands (including cutaway peatlands) should be **fully** included in the development of River Basin Management Plans and that they are appropriately assessed in the Strategic Environmental Assessment of County Council Development Plans. This document is available at www.ucd.ie/bogland and we would recommend that this be fully distilled into the next revision of the River Basin Management Plan.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our concerns and I would appreciate an acknowledgement of this submission. I am also available to meet with your team to discuss the intergration of our recommendations into the final River Basin Management Plan.

SWAN Position Paper on Peat extraction and the RBMP

IPCC are liasing with NGO colleagues in SWAN in relation to the RBMP. We attended a joint workshop between SWAN and the EPA on the RBMP which has helped to inform our submission above. We wish to support the procedural issues that SWAN highlight with regard to the practical workings of the Local Authority System proposed in the draft RBMP particularly in relation to peat extraction.

Yours faithfully,

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References:

National Peatlands Strategy, The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015.

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Action Plan for Blanket Bog and Wet Heath Habitats: Technical Aspects, Mary O'Connor, Duchas The Heritage Service, 2000.

Bogs and Fens of Ireland Conservation Plan 2005, Dr Peter Foss, Dr Catherine O'Connell & Patrick Crushell M.Sc. Irish Peatland Conservation Council, 2005.