

Crucial cross-border cooperation to protect the environment across the island of Ireland must not be “diluted” by Brexit, warned MEPs, NGOs and leading legal experts at a conference today.

The views were expressed at a conference in Dundalk today [Friday, 16 June 2017] to examine the potential impacts on the Irish environment in a post-Brexit world and explore opportunities for new ways of working together on cross-border issues.

MEPs, legal experts and environmental groups outlined the potential weakening of legislative protection for nature as the single greatest environmental risk posed by Brexit.

Delegates at the conference particularly emphasised the importance of ensuring equivalency in environmental standards north and south of the Border.

The severity of this issue has been recognised at a European level, with the EU’s Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, recently highlighting the risk of environmental “dumping” if there is a divergence of standards between the UK and member states. (1)

There are currently over 650 pieces of EU legislation in force to protect the environment, habitats, air quality, waste, food safety and a myriad of other areas, and are the principal drivers for the vast majority of environmental protection in place in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. (2)

However, it is still unclear how environmental standards will be upheld in the future, with the British Government yet to set out the detail as to how it will achieve its stated aims with regard to the environment post-Brexit.

Opening the conference, Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness emphasised that environmental standards “must not be diluted” by the UK’s exit from Europe.

“Brexit poses many challenges but the threat to environmental progress, which the EU has championed, is one of the most significant,” added the MEP for the Midlands–North-West.

“For Ireland, it is important to have the same high standards north and south of the border and a divergence of standards would be bad for citizens and for business.”

Environmental Pillar Co-ordinator, Michael Ewing, added that it was of paramount importance to avoid a hard ‘environmental border’ which would undermine decades of progress in addressing a range of environmental issues.

In the potential absence in the North of any oversight from the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, he emphasised that effective compliance mechanisms will be critical to resolve and manage cross border environmental issues post-Brexit. (3)

He also called for the island of Ireland to be recognised as a “single bio-geographic unit” and for the cross-border dimension of many environmental issues such as water quality, habitat and species loss to be addressed in the context of the upcoming Brexit negotiations.

“This event is key to giving us the chance to discuss the challenges and opportunities provided by Brexit and to articulate how these issues could be jointly approached on a North/South basis,” he concluded.

Northern Ireland Environment Link Chair, Patrick Casement, outlined examples of how both networks are currently working on a cross-border basis to protect and enhance the environment, such as the All-Island Pollinator Plan.

He stressed that environmental networks North and South of the border are dedicated to working in tandem to ensure that environmental standards on both sides of the border are maintained.

“Our small island forms a single and unique unit in terms of our natural environment and our plant and animal species do not recognise the existence of a border. Many of these species are currently at risk of extinction on the island of Ireland and any dilution of protection will place them in further danger,” he said.

He added, “There is also a strong economic incentive to ensure protection of the environment. It is estimated that Europe’s network of protected nature sites currently provide economic benefits of €200 to €300 billion per year.”

He continued by highlighting the importance of cross-border co-operation to the economy: “All-Island Cooperation on Invasive Alien Species has been, and will be crucial. Invasive species were estimated to have cost the economies of Ireland and Northern Ireland a combined total of €261,517,445 in 2013.” (4)

Sinn Fein MEP Lynn Boylan also pointed to the potential serious consequences for food regulation, outlining how Brexit may be “devastating” for Irish farmers “who pride themselves on the quality of the food they produce”.

“Farmers would face a flood of cheap food entering the market that in order to compete would force them to either reduce their own standards or leave the business altogether,” she added.

“It is in the island of Ireland's interests that any deal struck with Britain and the EU protects our food and environmental standards.”

It was also noted by many delegates that the changed situation post-Brexit could offer new opportunities for the environmental sector across the island to work more closely together in line with a joint commitment to maintain and strengthen environmental standards.

The conference took place at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Dundalk and was organised by European Parliament in partnership with the Environmental Pillar and the Northern Ireland Environment Link.

The full agenda for the conference is available here: <https://goo.gl/l73PsD>

ENDS

- (1) Speech by Michel Barnier, Chief Negotiator for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations with the United Kingdom, at the plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions (Brussels, 22 March 2017): <https://goo.gl/Xu6lTt>
- (2) Institute for European Environmental Policy, Report on the influence of EU policies on the environment: <https://goo.gl/9nPAx3>
- (3) Both the British and Irish governments have a long history of failing to comply with their environmental obligations, with numerous cases currently before the European Court of Justice: <https://goo.gl/397Tp3>
- (4) Joint Submission from the Northern Ireland Environment Link and the Environmental Pillar to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, 1 June 2017: <https://goo.gl/IYqmGt>

Quotes in Full

Fine Gael MEP and Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mairead McGuinness, said:

"Brexit poses many challenges but the threat to environmental progress, which the EU has championed, is alarming."

"The UK as part of the EU has worked to improve many aspects of our environment including clean air, water and safe food."

"When the UK leaves the European Union, these high environmental standards must not be diluted and progress must not stall. For Ireland, it is important to have the same high standards north and south of the border and a divergence of standards would be bad for citizens and for business.

"The Brexit deal must not undo important work on environment, should the UK decide to drop EU standards."

Sinn Fein MEP and member of the European Parliament's Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI), Lynn Boylan said:

"The potential for serious environmental consequences from Brexit are very high especially for Ireland. If the British government opts for a hard Brexit they will no longer have to comply with EU environmental standards.

"The EU has established standards in environmental protection and food regulation that are significantly higher than in other countries. There is a real risk that in a hard Brexit scenario Britain would sacrifice those standards to increase trade with the US and other Countries.

"Their ability to monitor food products coming into the British market would also be hampered as they would no longer have the shared resources of the EU and EFSA. This could be devastating for Irish farmers on the island who pride themselves on the quality of the food they produce.

"Farmers would face a flood of cheap food entering the market that in order to compete would force them to either reduce their own standards or leave the business altogether.

"A post-Brexit British Government would no longer have to comply with the greening measures of CAP or the Habitats Directive and while many of us would say that those measures do not go far enough, they do at least take us in the right direction.

"It is in the island of Ireland's interests that any deal struck with Britain and the EU protects our food and environmental standards."

Coordinator of the Environmental Pillar, Michael Ewing, said:

"Many environmental issues such as water quality, habitat and species loss have a strong cross border dimension.

"It is crucial therefore that the island of Ireland is considered as a single bio-geographic unit and that effective mechanisms exist to resolve and manage cross border environmental issues post Brexit.

"We in Northern Ireland Environment Link and our colleagues in the Environmental Pillar are therefore committed to working with our respective governments to ensure the best outcomes for our shared environment.

"This event is key to giving us the chance to discuss the challenges and opportunities provided by Brexit and to articulate how these issues could be jointly approached on a North/ South basis."

Chair of the Northern Ireland Environment Link, Patrick Casement, said:

"Our small island forms a single and unique unit in terms of our natural environment and our plant and animal species do not recognise the existence of a border. Many of these species are currently at risk of extinction on the island of Ireland and any dilution of protection will place them in further danger," .

"There is also a strong economic incentive to ensure protection of the environment. It is estimated that Europe's network of protected nature sites currently provides economic benefits of E200 to E300 billion per year.

“All-Island Cooperation on Invasive Alien Species has been, and will be crucial. Invasive species were estimated to have cost the economies of Ireland and Northern Ireland a combined total of €261,517,445 in 2013”.

"Whatever form Brexit takes, we believe that an on-going commitment is required for the provision of an all-island forum to minimise the threats to our natural environment. This will be vital in order to ensure the conservation of our shared natural heritage for future generations.

"Many environmental organisations have the experience and expertise to offer assistance in the time ahead and we look forward to working on a local, regional, national and all-island basis to meet these environmental challenges."

Notes for Editor:

About the Environmental Pillar:

The Environmental Pillar is a national social partner, comprising 26 national environmental organisations. It works to promote the protection and enhancement of the environment, together with the creation of a viable economy and a just society.

About Michael Ewing – Coordinator, Environmental Pillar:

Michael trained with the Environment Council (UK) and then worked as a facilitator and dialogue planner. From 2006-2008 he worked as the Senior Researcher at the Centre for Sustainability at the IT Sligo. In 2008 he was employed by the Irish Environmental Network (IEN) to build the advocacy coalition of 28 national environmental NGOs that in 2009 became the Environmental Pillar, and the fifth national Social Partner. In 2010 he was appointed to the additional role of Coordinator of the IEN, a network of 34 national environmental NGOs. He is a member of the National Economic and Social Council since 2009.

About Northern Ireland Environment Link:

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and co-ordinating body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. It has 70+ Full Member organisations, who represent more than 100,000 individual members, bringing together a range of knowledge and expertise across a wide range of environmental fields.

About Patrick Casement – Chair, Northern Ireland Environment Link:

Patrick is Chairperson of Northern Ireland Environment Link. Patrick lives in Ballycastle in Northern Ireland where he has run his own business, a family farm, for 30 years producing quality beef and lamb. He is currently the Chair of Northern Ireland Environment Link and the Heart of the Glens Landscape Partnership scheme and former Chair of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and The National Trust for Northern Ireland. His academic achievements include a B.A. in Zoology from Oxford and a M.Sc. in Ecology from Durham