



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

22 September 2026

Meeting location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:25am

1. Apologies

John Blair MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson reminded Members of their responsibility to declare any interests in any of the items under discussion.

None were declared.

3. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2026.

The NI Freshwater Task Force (NIFWTF) and Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) representatives joined the meeting at 10:26am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:26am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:30am

Gareth Wilson MLA joined the meeting at 10:40am

4. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session - The NI Freshwater Task Force (NIFWTF) and Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF).

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Robert Walsh - NIMTF Officer; and
- Mr Christopher McAteer - Environmental Strategy & Advocacy Manager - Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), on behalf NIFWTF

The Committee heard that the Bill represents an important opportunity to modernise Northern Ireland's approach to marine and freshwater management.

The Committee also heard recommendations that the Bill should include more robust enforcement powers; stronger penalties for pollution; greater transparency; and encouragement of environmental restoration.

The Committee also heard of a need for improved aquaculture licensing; fisheries management plans based on robust scientific evidence; permit systems that prioritise low-impact fishing and transparent reporting; and greater protection for non-target species.

The Committee heard that there was support for stronger penalties for pollution, particularly for repeat offenders; the removal of obsolete river barriers, enhanced

regulatory independence; transboundary cooperation; and long-term funding to deliver environmental recovery and compliance with statutory obligations by 2027-2031.

The Committee also heard that agriculture has some responsibility for poor water quality, but that recognition should be given for farmers who conduct environmental improvements. They proposed an enhanced “source to sea” approach through River Basin Management Plans, due to the interconnected nature of freshwater and marine ecosystems.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- Reform and simplification of aquaculture licensing and addressing the issue of removing abandoned gear when a company has ceased trading;
- The need for the Bill to contain provisions ensuring effective transboundary management;
- A programme of river barrier removal to restore the natural connectivity of rivers;
- The support in some quarters for an independent EPA to address weak regulatory oversight;
- Engagement with the Department during the consultation and co design process;
- The need to introduce adequate sanctions for pollution and the ending of the SORPI arrangement with NI Water;
- Concerns at the deterioration in the number of indicators achieving Good Environmental Status and how the Bill might address the decline; and
- Comparative legislation in the Republic of Ireland.

The representatives agreed to provide the Committee with further information regarding DAERA's access to riparian land to facilitate the investigation and removal of barriers, and an update on the issues raised by the Drainage Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the briefing paper be forwarded to the Department with a request that further clarification be provided as to which of the recommendations in the briefing paper have been reflected in the Bill; whether any proposals in the briefing paper not included in the Bill are intended to be addressed

through guidance, policy or subordinate legislation; and where recommendations have not been taken forward by DAERA, the reasons for this approach.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The representatives left the meeting at 10:58am

5. Any Other Business

None

6. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 24 September at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 10:59am

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated