

Plans by Dublin City Council to draw vast volumes of water from Lough Ree are being fiercely resisted in counties right around the midlands and west. Here, in this special report, MARESA FAGAN looks at the bid to meet the increasing water demand for the growing population of the Greater Dublin Area and the campaign being waged by the Shannon Protection Alliance against the controversial proposals.

## Commercial viability of Shannon towns under threat

PROPOSALS TO draw water from Lough Ree pose a threat to the commercial viability of towns and villages along the River Shannon and could jeopardise the water-based tourism industry that is developing along its shores. According to PJ Walsh, PRO for the Shannon Protection Alliance (SPA), there will be significant repercussions commercially for a number of towns and villages along the Shannon, such as Carrick-on-Shannon, Athlone, Portlanna, Nenagh and Ennis, if the proposals to extract were to go ahead. "Their scope for development will be castrated if these plans were to go ahead," PJ stressed.

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Local business interests also expressed concern that the proposals would threaten the commercial viability of the Shannon region and jeopardise the growing water-based tourism sector. Owner of the Shannon Key West Hotel in Roskealy, Niall Flynn told the Roscommon Herald that the proposals were of great concern to him and other business interests in the region.

"It's of great concern to me and others with business concerns reliant on the Shannon as a tourist, and amenity attraction. Pleasure boating has become hugely popular; all you have to do is go down to Carrick-on-Shannon, Dromod or Roskealy to see the amount of boats parked along the Shannon," Mr Flynn said. As chairman of the Longford Vintners Association, Mr Flynn had already been raised at local meetings and would be further highlighting the national level as a matter of concern.

"From the point of view of all publicans in the area; we are all aware and concerned about it and believe that to draw water from Lough Ree, as proposed, would neglect the needs of the people of

this region," he said. "There is a lot of uncertainty about the consequences of what they are proposing to do.

-Cllr Tom Crosby

"It is not a very deep waterway as it stands. Water levels are as low as three foot at shore and are on average between seven to eight feet, rising to 16-17 feet at its deepest. You also have the normal local pressures on that supply, which include commercial supply and service needs for the increasing number of houses being built in the area," Mr Flynn added.

Councillor Tom Crosby, a member of the Shannon International River Basin District Advisory Council, who has a 90-berth marina at Tarnonaharry, also harbours concerns over the proposals. "There is a lot of uncertainty about the consequences of what they are proposing to do. And in light of the fact that there are a number of problems with water quality and quantity in County Roscommon, and the West of Ireland generally, I would certainly be opposed to the proposals to extract water from Lough Ree," Cllr Crosby said.

"The River Shannon is without doubt one of the most valuable assets in terms of tourism that we have here in County Roscommon and any negative impact on that would be detrimental to the county," he added. Cllr Crosby said that more information and consultation was needed before the proposals were progressed any further.

"There is a fear that a decision on this could be made over our heads but I don't think that we can allow that to happen and it is up to us in the local authorities not to let this happen," he said. "No decision can be taken until the people of the county and councillors are made fully aware of all possible impacts. The final decision should be vested in local authorities in the Shannon area and not in Dublin City Council. I don't see why water should be diverted to Dublin when our own local needs are not being met," he concluded.

# Dublin authority sets sights on Lough Ree as new major water source to meet growing demand

DUBLIN CITY Council is setting its sights on drawing vast volumes of water from Lough Ree in a bid to meet the increasing water demand for the growing population of the Greater Dublin Area.

The Greater Dublin Area (GDA), which takes in parts of the commuter belt, could face water shortages by 2012, if a new major water supply source is not put in place, according to Dublin City Council (DCC).

The council predicts that the population of the greater Dublin region will grow to an estimated 2.5 million people by 2031 and that the average water requirement will increase by 250 million litres a day to around 800 million

litres per day by 2031. To resolve a potential water crisis on the eastern coast in the future, DCC is strongly considering plans to extract and pipe vast volumes of water from Lough Ree to Dublin.

A feasibility study carried out last year to identify a new major water source for the GDA focussed on Lough Ree and desalination (desalting water) as possible solutions.

The council is considering extracting water from Lough Ree, and possibly from Lough Derg and downstream of Killaloe, but is largely focussing on Lough Ree as a possible solution, given its proximity to Dublin.

Preliminary modelling to

assess the impacts of abstracting up to 350 million litres of water a day concluded that water levels at Lough Ree could be maintained without impacting on minimum flows downstream of the lake.

DCC stated that water levels at Lough Ree could be managed within the regulations and guidelines that currently pertain to the lake, which were implemented by ESB and Waterways Ireland.

While a number of potential negative impacts were identified, the study concluded that the proposed extraction of water would have little or no impact on water levels or the ecology of the lake.

"The abstraction can be implemented within the normal operating range for Lough Ree. Therefore, it is expected that studies at the EIA (Environment Impact Assessment) stage will demonstrate no significant impacts on ecological systems," the report stated.

While the council also considered desalination as an alternative solution, the feasibility study concluded that desalination would cost more to operate in the long term.

Water abstraction from Lough Ree and the establishment of a desalination plant in Dublin would both incur similar capital costs, the report stated. DCC concluded,

however, that it would cost €40 million per annum in running costs for a desalination plant compared to just 10-15 million per annum to run an abstraction plant at Lough Ree.

On this basis, the feasibility study recommended that Lough Ree be considered as the preferred and more viable proposal.

Given the level of resistance and concerns over the Lough Ree proposal, however, DCC has since committed to further exploring desalination as an alternative option.

"Dublin City Council, having considered the findings of the Environmental Report and the extensive feedback from the public consultation

process, adopted the recommendation that further detailed examination of both technically feasible options be carried out during the subsequent phase of studies (the Preliminary Report), before DCC would be in a position to decide on which option(s) to bring forward to detailed statutory process including EIA/EIS," the council stated last month.

For the next phase of studies, a Hydrological and Hydraulic model of the Mid and Upper Shannon Catchment, including Lough Ree, will be developed.

The Preliminary Report and the Environmental Report studies are expected to be completed by mid 2008.

# Plenty of alternative options to solve possible Dublin water crisis

THERE ARE plenty of options open to Dublin City Council, other than extracting water from Lough Ree, to provide a solution to the regions growing water demands of London city.

"If you look at the aquifer supply as a potential water source, in addition to water conservation measures, water harvesting, desalination and other potential sources, we would have enough water to last the next 50 years," PJ Walsh PRO for the group said.

He added that Dublin City Council had embraced massive housing and commercial development in the last 15 years but had failed to deliver on water and sewerage infrastructure to support this prolific rate of development.

"It (Dublin City Council) is now, according to the experts in the EPA, six years behind in infrastructural develop-

ment and that's the genesis of the problem. Dublin City Council is now in a situation where it hasn't matched development with infrastructure in terms of water and sewage," he explained.

There are also concerns that any damage caused to the lake will be irreversible and it will be then too late to pull back. "The extraction system will in a very short time destroy the ecosystem that is the Shannon. And the big problem is that the damage is irreversible. There is no plan B to shut it off if damage becomes apparent," PJ said.

PJ stressed that natural law superseded all other law and that to interfere with Lough Ree and the River Shannon would only lead to its destruction. He cited the extraction of water from the River Jordan, which led to its irreversible destruction, as

an example of what could happen.

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-PJ Walsh

"As far as we are concerned Dublin City Council has no traditional, legal, historical or imperial rights to the Shannon, even though it has

appointed itself as primary stakeholders," he said. "They think they have sacrosanct rights over the lake. ... They are looking for the very source of life itself but they are not going to get it. The Shannon has given life to billions of animals and fish and millions of people since its inception and we're not going to let Dublin City Council just step in and destroy the Shannon to compensate for mistakes they have made in Dublin in terms of poor infrastructure provision," PJ stressed.

While Dublin City Council has yet to undertake a comprehensive survey and assessment of the proposal to extract water from Lough Ree, and the proposal has yet to get the green light, there is evidence to suggest that the council is already forging ahead with the controversial plans.

"The levels of water in the Upper Shannon region, even in normal summer, without any extraction at all, is getting to be of huge concern to boat owners. Excluding this unique summer that we have had, we have been getting drier summers and there were parts of the Upper Shannon that cruises weren't allowed to travel on because of the low levels of water," Martin added.

"Dublin City Council signed a contract for an incinerator last week despite the fact that planning permission has not yet been granted for the facility. When you see that you have to ask: what are they capable of doing to us?" SPA Chairman Martin McEnroe said.

It is understood that a com-

# Water extraction proposals will impact on Upper Shannon

PLANS TO draw more than 350 million litres of water every day from Lough Ree to serve the growing water demand of the Greater Dublin Area will have a detrimental impact on the upper and lower regions of the lake, according to the Shannon Protection Alliance (SPA).

While a feasibility report, undertaken for Dublin City Council, examined the extraction proposals and ruled out any negative impact on the levels of water at the lake, SPA members fear that it would affect the entire lake and its tributaries.

"The levels of water in the Upper Shannon region, even in normal summer, without any extraction at all, is getting to be of huge concern to boat owners. Excluding this unique summer that we have had, we have been getting drier summers and there were parts of the Upper Shannon that cruises weren't allowed to travel on because of the low levels of water," Martin added.

# Water usage a national issue

OPPOSITION TO proposals by Dublin City Council to extract vast volumes of water from Lough Ree go way beyond local concerns, according to the Shannon Protection Alliance (SPA), which believes that Ireland will face a water crisis in the future.

"We are not tree huggers or eco warriors; we are genuinely concerned about what is happening here. There is no plan in place nationally to look at the usage of water going into the future," Martin explained. He said that an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) must be carried out before any proposals to extract water from Lough Ree could go any further and more importantly, he said, a national assessment of water usage and demand was essential.

"It's not just the Shannon and Lough Ree that needs to be looked at; it's the country as a whole. There is enough water fall in this country to supply the whole of Europe at the moment, so why aren't they looking at digging reservoirs to store water that falls in the winter time and then there are a number of potential aquifer sources, which have been identified by the Geological Surveys of Ireland," he said.

The group is garnering unanimous local political support for their campaign of opposition and is hopeful of a positive meeting with Environment Minister John Gormley in the near future. "We would expect that a Water Commission or Board or some such body be set up in this country to deal with the whole issue of the usage of water in this country. A serious look is needed at this whole water issue because the next war is going to be fought over water; it's not going to be fought over oil. Fresh, clean and clear water is going to be a scarcity in 15 to 20 years time in this country," Martin stressed.

"Look at what's happened at Lough Corrib and Lough Cong. Look at what's happening in Sligo at the moment. Our water bodies are coming under tremendous pressure at the moment," he added.

The group believes that there is an over reliance on surface water sources throughout the country, which account for 95% of all our water sources, and which are more susceptible to disease and pollution.

# Environmental report identifies concerns for future of Lough Ree

An environmental assessment of proposals by Dublin City Council to extract water from Lough Ree identified a number of fundamental flaws in the feasibility study and also raised concerns over a number of issues, such as the impact on recreation and tourism on the Shannon.

Carried out by Jack O'Sullivan of Environmental Management Services for the Shannon Protection Alliance group, the report identified a number of key issues and concerns, even at this very early stage of the proposals. The report stated that many other possible options and combinations were ignored in the feasibility study and that potentially large, reliable and sustainable groundwater resources closer to Dublin were not adequately assessed as sources of water.

The report also stated that the feasibility study did not critically examine the assumptions on which the projected demand of 300 million litres of water per day was based and that it also failed to address the issue of water treatment plant sludge and its disposal. Concerns were also expressed over the possible impacts of the water extraction proposals on recreational use, tourism and the angling sector on Lough Ree and the River Shannon.

"The importance of recreational and tourist angling in the Shannon catchment has not been addressed in the feasibility study, and this has led to the widespread concern among angling and tourism interests," the report stated.

"Effects of a major abstraction on the capacity of Lough Ree and the River Shannon for recreation, navigation and fisheries, and on the existing capacity of the river for waste water disposal are not addressed adequately in the proposed plan," the report added. The environmental assessment of the proposals also pointed out that the feasibility study had not adequately determined the complex impacts on the "ecological status" of the aquatic, wetland and terrestrial environments. Mr O'Sullivan also found that the feasibility study was fundamentally flawed because it failed to consult with members of the public and other interest groups and stakeholders.

"The scoping and consultation process is fundamentally flawed in that only statutory organisations appear to have been advised, while the many people who use Lough Ree and the wider area likely to be affected by the proposed abstraction were never consulted at an early stage so that their concerns could be addressed at the option selection stage; i.e., there was no real or effective consultation, and therefore no public involvement in the decision-making process," Mr O'Sullivan stated in his report.



Members of the Shannon Protection Alliance are adamant that plans by Dublin City Council to extract water from Lough Ree must be resisted. Pictured at Hodson Bay were PJ Walsh, PRO; Henry Waterstone; Deputy Mary O'Rourke, President and Martin McEnroe, Chairman.

Pic. Padraig Devaney

# Potential demise of Lough Ree fisheries

PLANS TO extract huge volumes of water from Lough Ree could destroy recent efforts to breathe new life, through fish restocking programmes, into tributary streams and rivers off the River Shannon and Lough Ree.

Significant investment by Roscommon County Council, the Shannon Regional Fishery Board, ESB, angling clubs, and private companies in restocking programmes in tributary rivers and streams in recent years could be lost if the controversial proposals

by Dublin City Council to extract water from Lough Ree were to go ahead. Martin McEnroe, Chairman of the Shannon Protection Alliance (SPA) explained the groups concerns that the fisheries could be endangered by the controversial proposals.

"We have developed feeder streams in the Roscommon area, such as the Hind River. We spent in the region of half a million euros in the last four years developing this river. And we have and are developing feeder

streams coming out of Longford," he said.

'the lake won't survive unless the arteries are producing fish'

-Martin McEnroe

"It will have a huge knock on effect on the lake. If you

take the lake as the heart of the system and the feeder streams being the arteries, the lake won't survive unless the arteries are producing fish. If you cut off the arteries by lowering the level of water so that fish won't survive; it is going to have a knock on effect on the lake," he added.

For the past 10 years these feeder streams have been restocked with brown trout produced at a hatchery in Coosan, Athlone in a joint project between local angling clubs and the Shannon Regional Fishery Board. This

restocking programme has proven so successful that Lough Ree is now one of the prime mixed fisheries in the country, according to Martin.

"Lough Ree is getting to be hugely popular among the angling fraternity. In the last five years we have seen a marked increase in the numbers of visiting anglers, coming from all over the country, to fish Lough Ree," he said.

The SPA also harbours serious concerns over the potential impact of the controversial proposals on the flora and fauna of the lake, as

well as exacerbating existing pollution risks. The proliferation of algal blooms has been a problem on Lough Ree and this summer alone has resulted in activity on the lake being banned for short periods of time. If water levels were lowered at the lake, the SPA fear that this problem and other potential pollution risks could worsen.

The umbrella group, which represents 16 counties along the River Shannon and more than one million people living in the region, met with a special advisor to Environment Minister John Gormley last week, ahead of a meeting with the Minister himself in the coming weeks.

Plans by Dublin City

# Shannon campaigners outline concerns to Department

Council to extract water from Lough Ree to serve the growing water demands of the Greater Dublin Area in the future have met with strong resistance from local interest groups since the plans were first mooted last year.

Members of the group outlined their fears and concerns to the department official during a one hour meeting and presented two scientific reports in support of their belief that the extraction plans were unsustainable and would spell disaster for Lough Ree and the River Shannon itself.

The campaign being

mounted by SPA has so far received the unanimous support of local politicians and public representatives, in addition to eminent scientists and biologists, who believe that the proposals are flawed.

Westmeath TD Mary O'Rourke has come on board to support the campaign and has been elected honorary president of the campaign group. Local TDs Michael Finnan and Denis Naughten have also lent their support to the campaign to resist the Dublin City Council plans.

A motion rejecting the pro-

posal as part of the development plan for the Athlone area received the unanimous support of local councillors at a recent meeting of Athlone Town Council and the SPA is hoping that other public representatives in Roscommon and Longford will follow suit.

"We received the unanimous support of councillors at last week's meeting of Athlone UDC and a motion will be brought forward at the next meetings of Longford, Roscommon and Westmeath County Councils with a view to securing the same level of support for our cam-

paign," Chairman of the Shannon Protection Alliance Martin McEnroe told the Roscommon Herald.

"We are up and running and we will fight this to the last"

- Martin McEnroe