

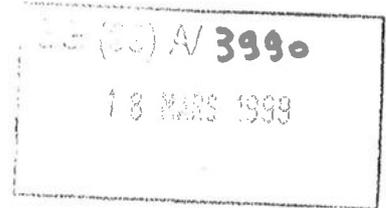
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Secretary-General
Commission of the European Union
Rue de la Loi 200
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Dear Secretary-General

I have been asked by my authorities to refer to Commission letter of 30 October, 1998 (ref. SG(98)D/9136) concerning implementation of Directive 80/778/EEC in Ireland.

My authorities wish to assure the Commission of their commitment to ensuring that all group water supplies are brought up to the standard required under Directive 80/778/EEC. The difficulties associated in particular with private group water schemes have been highlighted in the comprehensive annual reports on Drinking Water Quality published by the EPA and are fully acknowledged by my authorities. My authorities' letter of 23 April 1998 detailed the significant progress which has been made in developing our monitoring programme under the Directive and the measures and considerable resources which have been targeted at improving water quality in line with the requirements of the Directive. The letter also outlined the wide range of measures which have been specifically focused on improving the microbiological quality of drinking water supplies. In terms of the group water supply sector, the letter included details of the Rural Water Programme which was launched by my authorities in 1997 and has been considerably developed and increasingly resourced since then.

My authorities have asked me to emphasise the significance of the Rural Water Programme in the context of addressing the microbiological problems associated with private group water

schemes and to update you on progress under the Programme.

Background

Group Water schemes provide drinking water supplies to some 150,000 rural households. Approximately 95,000 of these households are served by group schemes connected to public water supply networks. Typically in these situations, the group provides the distribution system while the local authority provides potable water to the group for distribution to members.

Another 55,000 households are served by group schemes which rely on private sources such as a borehole or surface water, usually a lake. Water quality deficiencies are most acute in these privately sourced schemes where water filtration and disinfection equipment may not always be employed or not operated satisfactorily.

Group schemes vary in size from schemes serving two houses to those with over 1,000 houses. Based on the 1991 Census returns, the average group scheme serves some 28 houses (approximately 100 persons). These schemes are developed through co-operative community effort. The schemes, including the distribution system, any pumping and electrical plant, storage reservoirs etc, are owned collectively by the group members. The members elect trustees or form a body corporate (registered co-operative or limited company) to execute, operate and maintain the scheme on their behalf. Grants are available from the Department of the Environment and Local Government to support the capital expenditure incurred in the development and upgrading of such schemes.

Since the commencement of annual reporting on drinking water quality in Ireland in 1989, the number of supplies covered and the number of samples taken and analysed in respect of microbiological parameters have increased greatly. Particular progress was achieved in 1996 and 1997 due largely to the

increased monitoring of private group water schemes.

The table below summarises returns for the 1995-97 period.

YEAR	Public Schemes ³		Group Schemes	
	Number ³		Number	
	Supplies	Samples	Supplies	Samples
1995	896	10,810	507	1,137
1996	919	12,224	749	1,713
1997	998	13,402	971	1,880

Rural Water Programme

The increased monitoring of private group supplies reflects my authorities' concern to tackle water quality deficiencies in this sector. With the objective of improving the quality, reliability and efficiency of rural water supplies, my authorities have introduced a comprehensive range of measures together with significantly increased capital resources under the umbrella of the Rural Water Programme. Progress on the main provisions of the Programme is summarised below:-

Capital expenditure under the Programme increased from £8.5 million in 1996 to over £21 million in 1998. The capital provision for 1999 has been further increased to £28.6 million. Details in relation to the annual subsidy and grant provisions under the Programme were included in my authorities' letter of 23 April, 1998.

A National Rural Water Monitoring Committee has been set up to advise on rural water supply policy and to monitor the implementation by local authorities of the range of capital grant measures for the upgrading of existing schemes and the provision of new group schemes. The Committee is representative of local authorities, the private group scheme sector, other rural organisations and the Department of the Environment and Local Government.

With the objective of ensuring that future water supply policy is properly planned and determined in a spirit of partnership with the private water supply sector, the Monitoring Committee will oversee the compilation of a model Strategic Rural Water Plan which will form a blueprint for development of rural water supplies into the new millennium. Consultants are currently preparing the model plan.

The National Federation of Group Water Schemes, the umbrella organisation for the group scheme sector, plays a key role in promoting (i) awareness in relation to water quality issues and (ii) best practice in the operation and management of group schemes. The annual grant to the Federation in respect of its education and development programme has been increased from £100,000 in 1998 to £250,000 in 1999 in recognition of its expanded role in providing essential training and education to the group sector.

Under the Technical Assistance measure of the EU supported Operational Programme for Environmental Services, 1993-1999, funding is being provided for the provision of training centres (5) and associated courseware to provide an effective training programme for operatives and managers of water and wastewater

infrastructure. In 1998, specialist training courses and facilities were developed to cater for the training needs of the group water supply sector, with the objective of ensuring best practice in the management and operation of group water supplies.

As part of the data-gathering stage in the preparation of Strategic Rural Water Plans required of all county councils, they are currently preparing an inventory of group schemes in their areas. This will involve the collection of essential information on water quality, source capacity, domestic and non-domestic water demand, network and associated plant and equipment as well as information on the operation and management of each scheme. All information in relation to water quality will be incorporated in future annual reports on drinking water quality.

A major new initiative which was recently launched on a pilot basis in County Roscommon is designed to carry out a detailed assessment of factors which impact on the quality of rural water supplies and the effectiveness of technologies appropriate to smallscale water supply systems. The results of this study will be extremely useful in the development of management and treatment strategies for the private group water supply sector generally. Funding of £5 million has been provided for the project which involves:

- a comprehensive analysis of every group scheme in County Roscommon over a twelve month period to identify the various factors which have an adverse effect on water quality and the remedial action necessary to deal with these factors,

- a report by international consultants on the effectiveness of new water treatment technologies under Irish conditions, and
- practical pilot testing of recommended technologies in selected group schemes to determine their suitability for wider application in Ireland.

The Rural Water Programme represents a comprehensive and substantial response by my authorities to address the water quality problems associated with the private group water supply sector. The Programme has been developed on the basis of my authorities' commitment to ensuring that rural water supplies are brought into compliance with the requirements of the Drinking Water Directive. My authorities anticipate significant progress over the next 2 - 5 years in terms of improved drinking water quality for rural communities throughout the country.

In the light of the Commission's concerns over the inadequacy of the statutory basis in Irish legislation for dealing with quality deficient group supplies, my authorities have asked me to assure the Commission that consideration is being given to this matter in the context of a new water services Bill which is at present in the early stages of preparation.

My authorities have invited officials of the Commission to visit Ireland so that they can be more fully informed on the current position in relation to the implementation of the Rural Water Programme.

Yours sincerely



Environment Attache