

Voluntary Report – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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Report Name: Ireland's Nitrate Derogation Extended Another Three Years

Country: Ireland

Post: London

Report Category: Agricultural Situation, Dairy and Products, Livestock and Products

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Report Highlights:

On Tuesday, December 9, 2025 European Union (EU) Member States voted to grant Ireland a further three-year extension to its nitrate derogation - allowing Irish beef/dairy farmers to avoid more stringent EU nitrogen restrictions. Of Ireland's 140,000 beef and dairy farms, over 7,000 currently take advantage of the derogation which indirectly allows them higher stocking rates and increased dairy/beef production. The derogation was expected to end in January 2026, but under the recently negotiated extension Irish farmers ensures continued production while also tightening of the conditions Ireland must meet to keep the derogation.

Summary: Ireland's nitrates derogation from the European Union (EU) permits farms to operate above the 170 kg livestock manure nitrogen per hectare (N/ha) allowed in other Member States, up to 250 kg N/ha, but is subject to additional conditions. This derogation means higher stocking rates. Of Ireland's 140,000 beef and dairy farms, over 7,000 currently take advantage of the derogation which indirectly allows them higher stocking rates. This derogation was scheduled to expire at the end of this year. On December 9, 2025 following significant lobbying by the Irish government, EU Member States voted to grant Ireland a further three-year extension. The extension comes with a tightening of the conditions Ireland must meet to maintain its derogation.

Background: The last significant change to Ireland's nitrate derogation came on January 1, 2024 following a 2023 [report](#) from the Irish government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This interim water quality review is part of the Nitrates Action Programme required by the European Commission as a condition of Ireland's nitrates derogation. The report concluded that "over 44,000 km² (17,000 miles²) of land is identified as requiring additional measures to protect water quality". As a result, derogation farms located within this area had to reduce their application rate of manure to 220 kg N/ha per year. It affected 3,000 farms and led to some producers substituting beef cattle for dairy cattle to maintain the size of the national herd and generates higher margins for producers.

The principle concern by Irish farmers was the 2026 termination of the nitrate derogation unless negotiated otherwise by the Irish government. Consequently, the Department for Agriculture, Food & the Marine (DAFM) has expended significant resources and political capital exploring compromises with the European Commission to improve water quality without reducing maximum stocking rates, leading to the recently confirmed extension to the derogation.

Next Steps: Speaking after the announcement, Minister for Agriculture Martin Heydon described the decision as a "very important day for Ireland". With 90 percent of all beef and dairy production exported, it is indeed the case that this decision buys Ireland more time to address water quality without impinging on export income.

While the announcement has been broadly welcomed by the Irish agricultural sector and politicians, the additional conditions attached to the extension have not gone unnoticed. The extension to 2028 requires DAFM to undertake almost 600 detailed assessments in sub-catchments (geographical areas where water runoff and rainfall collect) to demonstrate water quality conditions are being met. In addition, in 2028, slurry storage requirements for dairy farmers will be tightened, derogation farm fertilizer limits reduced, and some derogation farms will be required to increase the buffer strips on their farms when spreading fertilizer. The language in the decision also leaves the door open for future derogations, with Minister Heydon stating, "it is very much my ambition we will have one into the future, because this is delivering water quality but it is also supporting farmers and it is proof positive that our farming system in Ireland is different to the rest of Europe."

Attachments:

No Attachments.