

EPA Review - May 2010
Response from Trinity College Dublin

Background

Staff from the Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics & Science, TCD, were asked to forward comments in relation to their involvement with the EPA giving consideration to the Consultation Document provided.

Comments were made in relation to the following Strategic Themes:

5. Environmental Monitoring and Research

The EPA has been a good source of national funding for applied environmental research and has funded both large and small research projects, allowing the employment of both PhD students and post-doctoral researchers. Since environmental challenges are likely to increase in the future and given that there still isn't a lot of base-line data, funding in this area will need to be maintained and strengthened. The EPA would seem the appropriate institution to support this research (particularly given the constraints under which both the Department of the Environment Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) and Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) operate).

However, with regards to the terrestrial environment, the EPA's role overlaps with several other bodies (including, DEHLG, DAFF, Teagasc, Marine Institute, BIM, Central Fisheries Board and National Biodiversity Data Centre) and the EPA's environmental monitoring is largely confined to air and water systems, excluding terrestrial ones. Although several large-scale recent research projects have focussed on terrestrial ecosystems through their "Biodiversity" funding topic, and the EPA have recently produced a "Biodiversity Action Plan", calls for funding for these projects have been very subject specific, and in some cases haven't allowed very long in terms of proposal development time. In addition, it would be good to have more EPA staff with experience of terrestrial ecosystems in the "Biodiversity Section" who deal with these projects.

6. EPA's performance as a provider of environmental information

The EPA requires data from funded research projects to be uploaded onto their "SAFER-Data" site. After a period of 12 months, the data is then freely available for download. Twelve months seems to be a short time frame given that it can take PhD students much longer than that to publish their data. Accessing datasets is relatively simple but there may not be many datasets directly relevant to an individual's research. Perhaps this facility is not necessary as approaching the person who collected the data directly can sometimes be as efficient.

7. EPA's role in environmental assessment

Some respondents did not know that the EPA provide environmental information – does the EPA use datasets it holds? Or does the EPA act as an intermediary between researchers and those carrying out assessments? Again, the EPA's role appears to be limited to air and water, and not the terrestrial environment (perhaps because of overlap with NPWS/DAFF?)

9. Evaluation of resource allocation in light of current and future obligations

A loss in funding for environmental and climate change research would be devastating for the College as a research institution (indeed all third level Institutions) and disastrous for the country in terms of natural resource management and use, and sustainable economic recovery. Maintaining research funding in these areas is absolutely essential. Perhaps funding for environmental and climate change research could be streamlined so that it doesn't just come from a variety of sources

(as it has done to present e.g. from EPA, NPWS, DAFF, Teagasc etc) but comes through one Environmental Research Council or as a branch of SFI?

Other General Comments

One major concern is that the EPA is constrained in terms of the environmental expertise that is held in-house. There seems to be few/if any officers with environmental policy, environmental economics, environmental studies expertise and so limited engagement with the project findings and therefore a lost opportunity to feed research results into policy frameworks.

The EPA could use existing expertise within universities to build into policy through advisory boards and committees for policy management much more directly and formally i.e. with recognised positions for academic staff related to their involvement in funded projects on policy related matters.

Funded research outputs should be used explicitly within policy statements and these should be fed directly into other relevant government departments such as NPWS, DAFF, Teagasc etc.

Future priorities for research should be guided by consultation with those working at the coalface of research - this has been done in the past to some extent but the resulting calls have been too narrow to allow for innovation from the research community to build essential knowledge beyond baseline data (which is essential but alone insufficient to build a knowledge-based environmental policy framework).

It is essential that the budget for environmental research through the EPA is not cut in the future, particularly if the rhetoric of the 'green, smart economy' is to be backed-up with sufficient funds to support innovation within research and development.
