

12 July 2022

Dear Taoiseach,

I am writing to express our serious concern about the delay in agreeing the Sectoral Emissions Ceilings, which were due to go to Cabinet for decision today. I would ask you to convene the Coalition party leaders to ensure that all sectors step up and an overall outcome that is robust and plausible is reached speedily.

Your Government has made significant progress in reforming Ireland's climate policy. The Climate Act 2021 is in line with international best practice in climate policy governance, puts a 51% cut in polluting emissions by 2030 into law, and was passed in the Dáil just a year ago by 129 votes to 10. The strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council divided that into two five year Carbon Budgets, which were again adopted on a cross-party basis by the Dáil in April.

What is imperative now is that we don't delay in moving from policy to action, in starting to actually reduce emissions. Once we do that, and we see that many of the solutions to pollution also have other positive benefits that improve quality of life, we can get into a virtuous cycle of innovation and implementation.

But there is no point pretending that the transition to zero pollution can be completely smooth. We have left it too late for that.

You were part of Government that tried to introduce a robust climate law framework in 2010. At the time average pollution reductions of 4% a year would have got us to what is now our 2030 emissions target in tonnes of greenhouse gases. That legislation was met with an intense lobbying effort from vested interests that did not want Ireland's climate targets in law. As a result of the "lost decade" that followed we are now facing average annual reductions of almost double that to achieve the same emissions level, one which is now enshrined in law.

We are now faced with doing in one decade what we could have taken two decades to do. I wouldn't start from here as the saying goes. But as Nicholas Stern pointed out in his landmark report in 2006, the longer we wait the more costly and disruptive the transition will be. Having waited this long to get serious about climate action, the choice is between disruption now and destruction soon if we fail to contain accelerating climate breakdown.

All this is by way of saying we cannot allow any vested interest, no matter how loud their lobbying nor how genuinely felt their concerns, derail Ireland's climate action effort for a second time. Friends of the Earth is committed to the principles of just transition. But there is a deal implicit in that concept and it is this: when a sector affected by the necessary shift away from intensely polluting activity embraces the need to transition, in return the state will use the means at its disposal to support the workers, communities and business through that transition while promoting decent work and flourishing communities. Just transition therefore is not a veto on action. Vested interests cannot trump the urgent public interest in containing climate breakdown. As you told the Dublin Climate Summit recently, "the imperative is we act now".

In this context, it is essential that the Sectoral Emissions Ceilings are agreed as a matter of urgency and that attention turns to the implementation of the actual measures that will reduce pollution through the "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" needed to limit global warming to 1.5C, as the IPPC put it.

It has been clear since the three Coalition party leaders launched the Climate Action Plan last November that every sector would have to reduce its pollution at the upper end of the indicative range in the plan to achieve the 51% cut enshrined in law. It was a question of simple arithmetic: that is the only way the sectoral limits add up to no more than the overall budget.

To the best of my understanding, every Department apart from Agriculture has agreed their emissions reductions will be at the upper end of the range. I have heard representatives of farming groups say that the climate law says that the Government will take account of the “special economic and social importance” of agriculture. It does, and the Government has. The proposed reduction in agricultural pollution is 30% compared to 60% for the other sectors of the economy and society combined, that is twice as much, twice as fast. But lobbyists for agri-business don’t want cuts of more than 22% in their polluting emissions. That would mean cuts of 68% for the rest of society, more than three times as much and three times as fast. That is neither fair nor feasible.

We know from UCC modelling what the difference between 22% and 30% would mean for the rest of society. On top of all the challenging measures already needed, like 500,000 retrofits and 1 million EVs, it would mean taking a quarter of all cars off the road, or all vans, or closing cement factories or households taking additional action to cut their own pollution at a cost of €5,000 each, to take up the slack from agriculture’s failure to do its fair share.

Anyone arguing for agriculture to do no more than 22% needs to make clear which of the above alternatives they favour and why they think that sector should make up for less action in agriculture. I spoke at the Oireachtas Committee hearings in February where representative of various social partners were asked did they accept the overall carbon budget and no one rejected it. It has now been adopted as binding by the Oireachtas on a cross-party basis. And it is worth remembering that while the 51% cut in emissions by 2030 is in line with what the EU is planning, it still isn’t even Ireland’s fair share of the effort to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement on a strict science and equity basis. A 51% reduction is the least Ireland must do therefore. There is no further wriggle room, and therefore no room for further concessions to any vested interests, no matter how vocal or well connected they are.

Your government has made real strides over the last couple of years to show Ireland is gearing up to take serious climate action. This decision is the litmus of that commitment. You have spoken convincingly recently of the need to rise to the climate challenge. The decision on the Sectoral Emissions Ceilings will be a significant part of your legacy as Taoiseach. We urge you to ensure they are fair to all sectors and send a clear signal to every sector that the race to a cleaner, safer future starts now.

Yours sincerely,

Oisín Coghlan

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oisín Coghlan', written in a cursive style.

Chief Executive

Friends of the Earth