



Wind Energy Ireland Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action

On behalf of Wind Energy Ireland, I would like to thank the committee for the invitation to join you today.

Wind Energy Ireland is the country's largest representative body for renewable energy with over 160 members throughout the wind energy supply chain.

Wind energy has transformed Ireland's electricity system – cutting millions of tonnes of CO₂ emissions every year – 4.5 million in 2020 alone, more than all other renewables combined – and steadily reducing our dependency on imported fossil fuels.

I would like to begin by stating very clearly that our Climate Action Plan targets are at serious risk. We must cut our carbon emissions by 30 million tonnes per annum by 2030. We cannot – I say again – we cannot achieve this without 5,000 megawatts of offshore wind energy connected to the system.

The problem is not a lack of projects. As you can see from the presentation shared with Committee members, we have over 20,000 megawatts of capacity under development off the east, south and west coasts. We have the projects. We have the investment. We have the teams who can deliver.

Twelve months to deliver our targets

Last September, at our annual Offshore Wind Energy Conference, we published [Twelve Months to Deliver Offshore Wind](#). It showed that none of the targets and deadlines contained in the [Building Offshore Wind](#) report have been, or will be, met.

We must acknowledge that over the previous two years we have had to deal with an unprecedented healthcare crisis, and it is true, despite this, that there has been progress.

I would like to give credit to the Government, and policymakers from all sides, who worked on the legislation for the passage of the Maritime Area Planning Act just before Christmas. The model for our offshore electricity grid has now been identified. Consultations are also now underway or recently completed on the first offshore auction, for the Maritime Area Consent process and to identify Phase Two offshore projects which will deliver at the end of the decade.

But this does not change the fact that we are losing time. We can – and will – develop offshore wind farms. But whether we will develop enough to meet our 5,000 MW target by 2030, and to cut carbon emissions in the power sector to under 2 million tonnes, depends on what our political leaders – both in Government and in Opposition – do next.

The *Twelve Months* report identified several key actions but, in the interest of time, I will briefly focus on four – planning, grid, green hydrogen and the supply-chain.

Improving the Planning System

Each individual offshore wind farm will be one of the largest infrastructure projects delivered in Ireland in a generation. They are large, complex and highly technical pieces of infrastructure.

The planning applications for permission to build them must be thoroughly and robustly scrutinised. For this to happen we need far more resources in An Bord Pleanála but also in other bodies such as the National Parks & Wildlife Service and there must be increased funding for environmental stakeholders working to protect our marine biodiversity.

If a project takes 18-24 months to get planning consent and another 18-24 months to survive a judicial review the chances of that project being connected by 2030 are extremely slim.

As well as resourcing the planning system, we need the establishment of the Environmental and Planning Court – with the funds to make it effective – that is set out in the Programme for Government to ensure a swift, effective judicial review system that adheres to our obligations under the Aarhus Convention.

We are confident in our members, in the work they are doing to ensure their projects are delivered sustainably, with the support of local communities and with respect to our marine biodiversity. We welcome the proper scrutiny of their planning applications but we cannot see projects needlessly delayed.

Improving the Electricity Grid

The Irish electricity grid is simply not strong enough to accommodate 5,000 MW of offshore wind energy.

EirGrid's grid development strategy, *Shaping Our Electricity Future*, must have strong political and public support right across Irish society. Support for its delivery is a litmus test that will identify those who are committed to tackling climate change and those prepared only to talk about it.

But even if everything in this strategy was delivered it would not be enough to meet Ireland's carbon budget targets. We will need to go beyond it and we currently have a team of experts in grid development, from Ireland and internationally, working on a piece of research showing how we can meet our electricity sector carbon budget target for 2021 – 2030. We hope this will be useful to EirGrid in updating their grid strategy later this year.

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss this report with committee members when it is finalised.

While this work is underway, I would appreciate the support of the committee for the establishment of an offshore grid steering committee to coordinate the technical and engineering challenges of connecting offshore wind energy.

Kick-starting the Green Hydrogen economy

There are other speakers here who will focus on the topic of Green Hydrogen so I will simply make two points.

First, as committee members will know, we recently published [Hydrogen and Wind Energy – The Role of Green Hydrogen in Ireland’s Energy Transition](#) which shows how it can play a vital role in Ireland’s transition to a net-zero society, boost our economy and make our energy supply more secure. We need a green hydrogen strategy as soon as possible.

But I would like to be clear that producing green hydrogen in Ireland is only realistic if we can cut the price of renewable electricity. The single biggest factor in the price of a unit of green hydrogen is the cost of the electricity used to produce it.

In 2020, in the first onshore renewable electricity auction, Ireland had the highest price of any EU country. We will not succeed until we coordinate industry, Government and other stakeholders to find ways to drive down the cost of electricity – for today’s families and businesses – and for tomorrow’s thriving green hydrogen industry.

Unlocking Ireland’s Supply-chain

Finally, we want to see a successful renewable energy industry in Ireland with offshore wind energy at the heart of it alongside green hydrogen and our onshore renewables.

If Irish ports and businesses are not able to take advantage of this opportunity, there is no doubt others will step in and the money invested will flow out of Ireland. The chance to develop a skills base and an industry that can compete internationally in a rapidly growing global renewable energy market will be lost.

This is the time for Ireland to seize the opportunity, to bring together industry, policymakers and communities to ensure the benefits are maximised from multi-billion-euro investments in zero carbon generation that can create thousands of skilled jobs at home and regenerate coastal communities right around the island.

We would like the support of the committee in our efforts to see the Government bring together key Government departments, and agencies like the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, to work alongside our members to ensure that Irish workers and Irish businesses benefit from Irish wind farms.

We believe that achieving Ireland’s goal of 5,000 MW of offshore wind energy by 2030 is possible. We can do this. But we can only do it if there is accelerated delivery right across the critical sectors which I have spoken about this morning. This is the challenge we need to overcome.

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