

'Offshore wind farms should not be located in key marine habitats'

AISLING MARIA CRONIN, 24 January 2026.

Ireland's need to transition away from fossil fuel dependency is clear - but it is important that valuable habitats and ecosystems are not lost in the process, says Val Freeman, a scientist and founding member of Blue Ireland CLG.

Blue Ireland is a coalition of citizens' groups who have come together with a goal of protecting key marine ecosystems, in light of government plans for major offshore wind development around the Irish coast. Led by a network of volunteers and wildlife experts, the group emphasises that such development must prioritise protection of Ireland's marine biodiversity. The conservation of habitats and species is key to ensuring the long-term health and carbon capture potential of Ireland's seas, supporting the attainment of our long-term climate goals.

When it comes to offshore wind farms, location is critical, says Freeman: "Renewable energy developments should not occur at the cost of our biodiversity."

She explains that if we lose valuable ecosystems and species in the rush to greenlight developer-led wind farms, our marine environment will ultimately suffer.

The group has a particular interest in protecting the biodiversity of the many sandbanks along Ireland's east coast. Sandbanks - horizontal or sloping planes of coastal sediment that are slightly covered by seawater at all times - serve as key nursery sites for fish, provide important feeding grounds for seabirds and help to protect the coast from erosion.

The Kish Bank in Dublin Bay hosts a significant population of guillemots, razorbills and terns. The banks also act as important feeding grounds for many other red-listed seabirds: for example, kittiwakes, shags, cormorants, common scoter and red-throated divers.

The future of the Kish and Bray banks remains uncertain. In 1999, licences were granted to investigate shallow nearshore sites for offshore wind development, at a time when the environmental impacts of offshore wind were poorly understood. Over the past 25 years, proposals for this site have mushroomed.

In December 2022, the 'Dublin Array' site, associated with the Irish company Saorgus Energy and German energy company RWE, was awarded a 'Maritime Area Consent' (MAC) - a form of State consent allowing for the occupation of a specified part of the maritime area. An application for planning permission was lodged with An Coimisiún Pleanála last year and in response, An Coimisiún has requested more detailed information from the developer.

Last year, the Kish and Bray banks were categorised as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International and BirdWatch Ireland, both of whom appealed for the conservation of these banks in 1999, when wind farm development was first considered. IBAs are internationally significant sites for the conservation of birds and biodiversity. The entire site

spans approximately 1,216 square kilometres, and its designation as an IBA is described as "long overdue" by Freeman, given its ecological significance. However, this area was excluded from the government's proposed Northwest Irish Sea Special Protection Area (SPA) - a decision Blue Ireland is appealing.

Freeman says that Blue Ireland accepts the benefits and necessity of having renewable wind energy available to Ireland. However, she adds that technological advancements of recent decades mean that changes can and should be made to the proposed Dublin Array, as it is based on an outdated proposal that was viewed as the only realistic possibility in 1999 - wind farms located on nearshore sand banks in shallow water.

Turbine structures can now be located in deeper waters, further offshore.

"What we are campaigning for is to ensure that best practice is applied to all planning applications for offshore wind energy," says Freeman. "Pushing through developer-led legacy projects that would wreak havoc in the most ecologically sensitive areas of our coast is not the answer. The European Union and all leading environmental organisations emphasise the need for ecosystem-based planning and careful site selection, both absent in Ireland."

Blue Ireland, together with local community councils, frequently hosts open meetings and Q&A sessions with experts in marine ecology, planning and renewable energy infrastructure, to share information and facilitate discussion. Previous speakers have included chartered environmental scientist Marie Louise Heffernan, and Bill Emmott, a writer and consultant best known for his 13 years as editor in chief of The Economist. Their next meeting is scheduled for March 3 in the Royal Marine Hotel, Dún Laoghaire at 7.30pm and is open to all.

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