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COVER NOTE

From: The Irish Houses of the Oireachtas
date of receipt: 20 March 2026
To: The President of the Council of the European Union

Subject: Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund ('ECF'), including the specific programme for defence research and innovation activities, repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/522, (EU) 2021/694, (EU) 2021/697, (EU) 2021/783, and amending Regulations (EU) 2021/696, (EU) 2023/588, (EU) [EDIP] [11770/1/25 - COM(2025) 555 final]
- Opinion on the application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality

Delegations will find enclosed the opinion¹ of the Irish Houses of the Oireachtas on the above.

¹ Translation(s) of the opinion may be available on the Interparliamentary EU Information Exchange website (IPEX) at the following address: <https://secure.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/document/COM-2025-0555>



An Comhchoiste um Aeráid, Comhshaol agus Fuinneamh

An Cion Polaitiúil maidir le COM (2025) 555

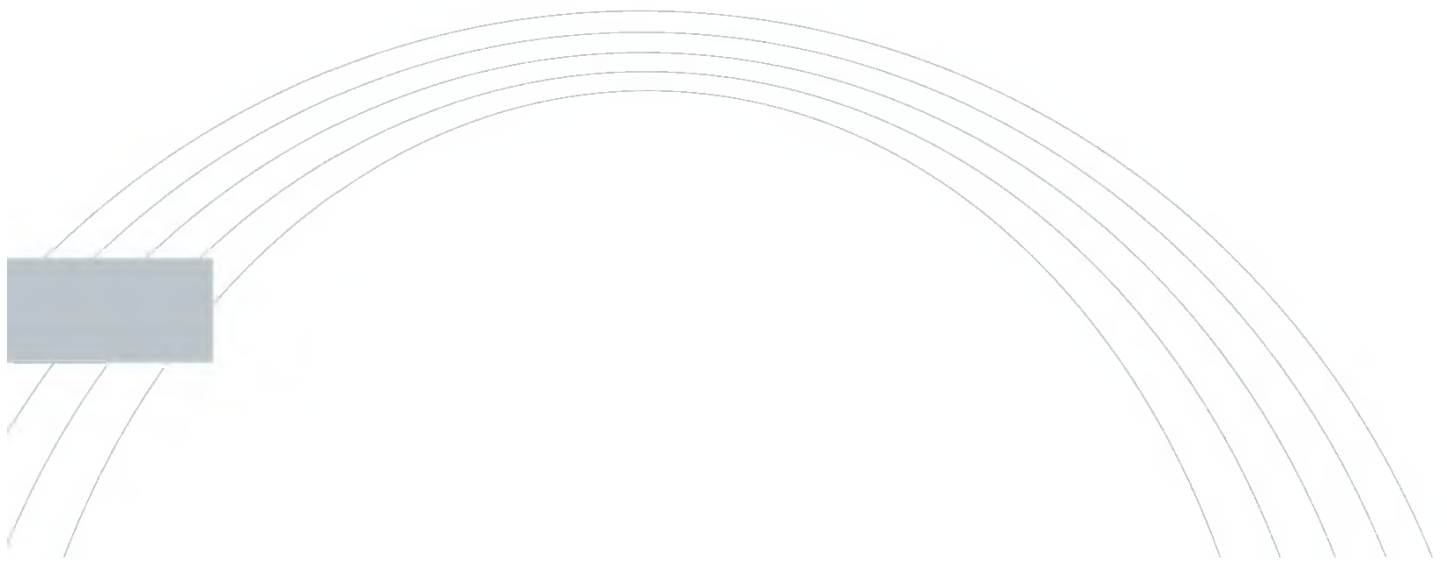
Márta 2026

Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy

Political Contribution on COM (2025) 555

March 2026

34/CEE/09



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Related information

Publications

All publications for this committee are available on the [Oireachtas website](#).

Committee videos

Footage of Committee proceedings can be found on the [Committee videos page](#).

Committee debates

Transcripts of Committee debates can be found on the [Committee debates page](#).

Contact details

The contact details for the Committee can be found on the [Committee page](#).

Orders of reference

Read the [Orders of reference](#) for the Committee.

Committee Membership

Cathaoirleach

[Naoise Ó Muirí](#), Fine Gael

Leas-Chathaoirleach

[Lorraine Clifford- Lee](#), Fianna Fáil

Members

[Ciarán Ahern](#), Labour Party

[Malcolm Byrne](#), Fianna Fáil

[John Clendennen](#), Fine Gael

[Réada Cronin](#), Sinn Féin

[Pa Daly](#), Sinn Féin

[Barry Heneghan](#), Independent

[Jennifer Whitmore](#), Social Democrats

[Naoise Ó Cearúil](#), Fianna Fáil

[Mark Duffy](#), Fine Gael

[Alice- Mary Higgins](#), Independent

[Malcolm Noonan](#), Green Party

[Noel O'Donovan](#), Fine Gael

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In July 2025, the European Commission (EC) published COM(2025)555-
Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund ('ECF'), including the specific programme for defence research and innovation activities, repealing Regulations (EU) 2021/522, (EU) 2021/694, (EU) 2021/697, (EU) 2021/783, and amending Regulations (EU) 2021/696, (EU) 2023/588, (EU) [EDIP
- 1.2 The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy considers this proposal to be highly significant to Ireland and the European Union (EU), particularly as it relates to the future existence of the EU LIFE Programme and dedicated EU funding for environmental and biodiversity initiatives.

2. Scrutiny by the Joint Committee

- 2.1 The Joint Committee first considered COM(2025)555 at its meeting on 4 November 2025. Members noted the contents of the proposal and decided on a course of further scrutiny to ascertain the potential impact of the proposal on dedicated climate and environmental funding by the EU. It was further decided that scrutiny would take the form of public meetings with stakeholders connected to the LIFE Programme in Ireland.
- 2.2 The Committee met with representatives from the Department of Climate, Environment & Energy and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) on 21 January 2026 and noted the following:
- The LIFE Programme is the EU's dedicated funding instrument for environmental and biodiversity initiatives.
 - The Programme is made-up of sub-programmes: Nature and Biodiversity, Circular Economy and Quality of Life, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation and Clean Energy Transition.

- LIFE is directly managed by the EC and funds pilot, demonstrator and strategic projects that are designed to test solutions, build capacity and support the practical delivery of EU Policy.
- Since 1992, Ireland has secured over 100 LIFE projects with total investment exceeding €200 million. Ireland's participation rate is high relative to population size and reflects sustained engagement by public bodies, NGOs and community-based organisations.
- The unique character of LIFE projects that involves specific recruitment of skilled staff to match project goals and Community Engagement Officers to help achieve public buy-in.

- 2.3 The Committee further notes that the primary implication of COM(2025)555 would be, from 2028, the repeal of the LIFE Regulation and that activities currently supported under LIFE would be integrated into larger funding instruments through mainstreaming and split between the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and the National Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP). Funding for the LIFE Programme would become one of several funding strands covering areas such as research, industry, digital technologies and defence. The inclusion of LIFE within a broader multi-sector framework raises concerns about how funding for environmental and biodiversity priorities will be protected if balanced against other strategic objectives.
- 2.4 The Committee notes the Commission's indication that environmental and climate objectives would be preserved through spending targets and intervention fields. This involves a green spending commitment across the whole Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of up to €700bn. However, stakeholders asserted that in practice, this spending could entail much broader actions than the targeted, specific and effective remit of LIFE Programmes.
- 2.5 Activities under the Nature and Biodiversity sub-programme, including support for NATURA 2000, species and habitat conservation and nature restoration, would be expected to fall primarily within the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans. Within that framework, for example, it is expected that they

would compete with a wide range of other priorities such as regional development, agriculture, fisheries and broader economic and social objectives. This new approach risks the erosion of funding levels for nature and biodiversity and diminished focus, impact and efficacy, including a potential reduction in specialised expertise within funding decision processes.

- 2.6 It was also noted that the proposed "competitive" frame may not actually be appropriate for nature and biodiversity work which is not ultimately geared towards competition, profit making or market capture but towards public interest, largely grounded in collaborative work and the sharing of ideas with others.
- 2.7 The Circular Economy and Quality of Life sub-programme, which supports actions on waste, water, air quality, chemicals, pollution prevention and environmental governance would also be largely absorbed into the National and Regional Partnership Plans. In practice these actions would compete with infrastructure, competitiveness, digitalisation and social inclusion measures within nationally determined programming envelopes.
- 2.8 Activities currently supported under the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation sub-programme would be expected to be spread across the National and Regional Partnership Plans and the proposed European Competitiveness Fund. Within those instruments they would compete directly with industrial policy, innovation, security and broader competitiveness priorities.
- 2.9 The Clean Energy Transition sub-programme would be primarily redirected towards the European Competitiveness Fund. In this context, actions focused on capacity building, consumer engagement and local energy initiatives would compete with large-scale industrial decarbonisation and market driven energy investments.

2.10 The Committee met with LIFE Programme Partners on 28 January 2026 to gauge the potential impact of the programme's cessation. The following partners appeared before the Committee:

- CORNCRAKE/TRAONACH LIFE

This 5-year project to conserve and enhance Ireland's corncrake population has received 73% of its €5.9million budget through the LIFE Programme. Through the establishment of a results-based agri-environmental programme, the project has already increased the national corncrake population by 50%. Dr John Carey asserted that LIFE funding allowed for the tools to bring the corncrake back from the brink of extinction.

- WILD ATLANTIC NATURE LIFE

This project aims to improve Ireland's performance in conserving legally protected habitats, with a focus on over 250,000 hectares of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated for blanket bog, a priority habitat under the EU Habitats Directive. Achievements so far include the creation of over 40 full-time jobs, the training of over 1,200 farmers and stakeholders in bog ecology and restoration and the creation and delivery of a school education programme. The programme is also piloting a home energy retrofit scheme which can provide a template for a national rollout in areas where programmes have a low uptake. Dr Derek Mcloughlin advised members that LIFE funding and support had been central in delivering better outcomes for society and the environment, particularly in rural areas.

- LOUGH CARRA LIFE

This project to address and reverse the decline of Lough Carra, Co Mayo has received €5 million in LIFE funding. Through the creation of a results-based agri-environmental focused on the reduction of nutrient losses to surface and groundwater, the project has yielded 354 hectares assessed with noticeable habitat improvement. This has been achieved through the creation of 22km of new or upgraded fencing, 71 hectares of riparian buffer zone and the planting of 835 native trees. Ms Ann Marie Meaney informed members that without

continued LIFE funding, Lough Carra faces the very real risk of irreversible ecosystem collapse.

- BREEDING WADERS EIP

This project, dedicated to the revival of some of Ireland’s most iconic wild bird species, has benefitted indirectly from the LIFE programme by accessing the network of connections and relationships that have developed therein over 30 years. Owen Murphy advised members that the timeframes, scale and ambition of conservation programmes need to be enhanced and that this can only happen through the maintenance of ringfenced budgets. He also stated that the environmental actions being discussed were not optional or sentimental; rather, they are a frontline investment in national resilience, security and survival.

3. Decision of the Joint Committee

- 3.1 On 18 March 2026, the Committee agreed to draft a political contribution and to forward to Darragh O’Brien T.D. Minister for Climate, Environment and Energy, Martin Heydon T.D. Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Timmy Dooley T.D. Minister of State with responsibility for Fisheries and responsibility for the Marine, and Alan Dillon T.D. Minister of State with responsibility for Circular Economy, Christopher O’ Sullivan T.D. Minister of State with responsibility for Nature, Heritage and Biodiversity, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, Roberta Metsola MEP, President of the European Parliament and to the President of the Council of the European Union.

4. Opinion of the Joint Committee

Having considered the proposal in detail, the Committee makes the following observations:

- 4.1 While welcoming initiatives to make EU funding more flexible to cater for emerging needs, the Committee is concerned that the ending of LIFE Programme

as a standalone instrument for the benefit of Environmental and Biodiversity Initiatives is deeply regressive.

- 4.2 While the ongoing need for clear, present and effective intervention is more urgent than ever, the cessation of the LIFE Programme is inherently contradictory.
- 4.3 Over the last three decades, the LIFE Programme has proven itself as a targeted, effective instrument for delivering EU environmental and biodiversity initiatives, with Ireland's successes offering clear proof of its practical benefits from large-scale strategic initiatives to innovative local pilots that shape national policy.
- 4.4 The LIFE Programme exemplifies a direct and valuable relationship between the European Union and its citizens, whereby tangible improvements in the natural environment are clearly attributable to European co-operation and resourcing.
- 4.5 The Commission's proposal pits activities that currently fall under LIFE sub-programmes against activities in a wide range of areas. The Committee believes that this will result in an inevitable dilution of environmental and biodiversity initiatives such as those that have taken place in LIFE, as they are forced to compete with unrelated priorities and are consequently pushed to the margins.
- 4.6 The Committee is concerned by proposed redirection of the funding for the LIFE Programme into a larger funding scheme covering areas such as research, industry, digital technologies and defence, noting that this is one in a series of moves by the European Commission to repurpose funding dedicated to climate, nature and biodiversity into larger schemes to achieve certain industrial, defence, and technological objectives which may conflict with environmental objectives.
- 4.7 The Committee also believes that the removal of the LIFE Programme would result in:

- The absence of a ring-fenced budget for environmental and biodiversity initiatives
- Reduced visibility of outcomes
- Fragmentation of actions across multiple instruments
- Potential access barriers for smaller public and civil society stakeholders

5. Recommendations of the Joint Committee

- 5.1 The Committee recommends an urgent reconsideration of COM(2025)555's proposed repeal of the regulation supporting the EU LIFE Programme. The maintenance of a dedicated and publicly accessible programme for climate and biodiversity action is manifestly in the interest of Ireland and the European Union.
- 5.2 The Committee welcomes the commitment to green spending that the EU Commission has made as part of the MFF proposal. However, it is recommended that this does not come at the price of a proven and successful initiative that showcases the clear benefit of the EU supporting bottom-up community-based climate and biodiversity action.
- 5.3 In the context of the ongoing climate and biodiversity crisis, the Committee recommends that all EU funding toward climate and environmental actions such as those undertaken in the LIFE Programme is exempted from qualification linked to competitiveness.
- 5.4 The Committee recommends that the success of the LIFE Programme is better harnessed to create national models for the advancement of community schemes and nature-based solutions to the Climate and Biodiversity Crisis.
- 5.5 In the development of the Multi-annual Financial Framework, the Committee recommends that consideration should be given to the EU Nature Restoration Law and the need for resource allocation to support achievement of the legally

binding targets, including through continuation of and extension of the LIFE Programmes.