

National Hydrology Conference 2010

**Address by Dr. Martin Mansergh T.D.
Minister of State at the Office of Public Works.**

**Radisson Blu Hotel, Athlone
Tuesday 16th November 2010, 10.00am**

Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me back to this 11th Annual Conference organised by the Irish National Committees of the International Hydrological Programme and the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage. I would like to commend the organising committee for the location of the conference in the historic town of Athlone, close to the banks of our greatest river and the birth place of one of the world's greatest tenors – Count John McCormack.. I would also like to extend a particular welcome to our guest and co-organiser, Dr. Michael van der Valk, Secretary of the Netherlands National Committee IHP-HWRP.

As Minister for state with special responsibility for the OPW, I have visited the Shannon catchment many times in the past year.

My return visit provides me with an opportunity to update the conference on the very significant events which have taken place in the last twelve months. Hardly had last years conference finished when we experienced a truly extraordinary period of wet weather, which led to some of the most traumatic flooding events seen in our lifetimes. Indeed, what I actually said last year was “The reality is that we are facing into a period, when climate change is likely to result in an increased incidence of flooding in our country”. Little did any of us think at the time that this “period” would occur in such a stark manner within a fortnight.

I would like to use the opportunity of this conference, therefore, to provide a review of the last year since the November 2009 floods to illustrate the strides the Office of Public Works is making to alleviate the scale and severity of the events of that time.

And I want to say to you as hydrologists, scientists and activists in the research and control of hydrological issues that this Government's focus turns to an ever increasing emphasis on hydrological studies, particularly in the areas of flood risk management and water quality. As Minister of State in OPW I spent much of last November and December visiting the many communities spread through nearly half the counties of the State, which suffered heavily from the effects of those flooding events.

Indeed as Minister with responsibility for the national flood protection policy, I am acutely aware of the crucial need to drive forward the coordinated programmes established by the 2004 National Flood Policy Review and the transnational coordinated frameworks set out in the EU Floods Directive and Water Framework Directive.

I can acknowledge with some satisfaction that my Office has transposed the Floods Directive, by way of Regulations, into national law well ahead of many EU Member States – some of whom are now overdue in such matters. In some respects we continue to perform well above the European average!

These Regulations have appointed the OPW as the national Competent Authority under the Directive and this has served to strengthen the hand of OPW in the coordination of accelerated and proactive response to the challenges posed by last year's floods. It will allow for a more directive role for OPW in the coordination and cohesion of national flood management and improvement in our flood prevention and alleviation measures.

A series of high-level meetings with national regional and local agencies of the State have been held throughout the year to set in train reviews of inter-agency protocols with a view to rapidly improving coordinated responses to the flood management challenges that we must meet over the next few years.

Central to the OPW's approach to flood management is the programme for the production and completion of Catchment Flood Risk Management Plans and associated flood mapping for all national catchments. OPW had been forefront in this respect in that it had already begun work on Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Studies (CFRAMS) on the Lee, Suir and Dodder Catchments, and also in the Fingal East Meath area prior to the adoption of the requirements set down in the EU Floods Directive. This established approach is being extended to all major catchments in Ireland.

Since the transfer of the coastal protection responsibilities to the OPW, the OPW has been liaising closely with Local Authorities with a view to prioritising projects that require immediate measures or studies. Having expended some €676,000 in this area in 2009, I am happy to confirm that OPW is providing some €1.9m this year. This is primarily covering coastal minor works projects, which are targetted at the mitigation of coastal flood and erosion risk.

I am also pleased to announce that the OPW have commissioned a strategic review of flood forecasting and warning in Ireland to look at how best to progress flood forecasting capabilities in flood prone areas. This review is intended to identify and assess the options for delivery of such a service in Ireland. On the basis of this we will develop an appropriate and sustainable strategy (including consideration of the potential

impacts of climate change) for flood forecasting and flood warning in Ireland. The results of the review are expected early in 2011, and will form the basis of our future strategy in this field.

More recently my Office has become a partner in the European Flood Alert System {EFAS}, which is a very promising experimental research programme involving nearly 30 European agencies. The aim of EFAS is to provide these agencies, mostly national hydrological bodies, with access to a sophisticated ensemble of meteorological and hydrological monitoring and predictive services across Europe, which aims to provide medium term watches and alerts for weather conditions leading to flooding events.

While the system is still in an experimental phase, it provides some prospects for improving our forecasting ability for major fluvial events and our ability, nationally and locally, to both anticipate and react to flooding challenges in the future.

Over the past five years, the Government has spent approximately €130 million on flood relief activities (*A further €112 million was spent on maintenance of arterial drainage schemes and collection of hydrometric information.*) The mitigation and reduction of flooding remains a top priority of the Government. This is entirely understandable, when one considers the devastation that floods have wreaked on individuals, communities and businesses last winter.

As I mentioned earlier, the various risk assessment studies upon which the OPW has embarked will greatly assist in our ability to identify areas most likely to be affected by flooding. These plans inevitably will call for further investment in flood defence measures.

While, of course, the major defence schemes tend to attract most publicity and public attention, there are many areas of the country that are afflicted by severe localised flooding events that fall outside of the remit of the major flood defence programme. It is important that these areas receive an appropriate response from the State.

Towards this end, the OPW has prioritised a programme of minor or small-scale flood defence works in local areas, which have been impacted severely by flooding. Under the programme, a total of €12 million has been allocated to local authorities for works and studies, this year and further applications for funding are being received and assessed on an ongoing basis. In total, 160 small-scale projects in 23 counties have been allocated funding. In allocating the funds, my Office continues to concentrate on areas, where there is a substantial risk to human life, property and infrastructure.

In 2010, OPW has provided for a number of high profile works including:

- Flood defence works at Ballinasloe of over €900,000
- €0.9m for quay walls in Cork, and
- €0.5m for Sallins.

I note the close congruence between the topics set out for this conference and the areas of priority for OPW, which I have talked about. There is no doubt but that the quality and depth of the on-going research detailed here today will go far to informing and honing the quality and reliability of the mapping and modelling exercises OPW will be engaged with over the next few years. And it is the comprehensiveness of that national data analysis exercise that will underpin the robustness of the flood management planning programme, which we will complete by 2016 in its first cycle. I am reassured by what is set out here in your conference programme that the calibre of the national CFRAM programme and emergent framework for flood management policy will be on a par with the best of practices among our European peers.

I wish you, an enjoyable day of listening learning and collaboration in this important national conference and assure you again that Government will maintain a close interest in this area over the coming years.