**Press Release**

**23 September 2024**

**New wetland restoration project opens a call for public participation**

Expressions of interest sought from local individuals and groups to identify wetland sites to be restored.

* Tóchar team in NPWS will support successful applicants in restoring their lands by providing funding towards survey work, restoration planning, interpretation and education or restoration actions on the ground.
* Landowners, communities and local groups in the EU Just Transition Territory are eligible for this call.

Tóchar is a three-year wetlands restoration project, co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union through the EU Just Transition Fund Programme. Taking its name from the hundreds of ancient paths or toghers laid across the bogs by our ancestors, the project will serve the community, bringing participants on a nature restoration journey.

Welcoming the launch of the call for Expressions of Interest, Malcolm Noonan, Minister for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform, TD, said: “The restoration of wetlands is part of the just transition journey towards climate neutrality, a journey where nature can play its part in the provision of a wide range of ecosystem services including nature-based solutions for climate change adaptation and mitigation. But nature also provides solace, health and recreational benefits, particularly for those who live in the vicinity of nature and wetland sites that are in good condition.  Restoring wetlands as part of the Just Transition is essential and community participation in this type of activity has numerous benefits. I am delighted to announce the call for Expressions of Interest for the Tóchar Wetlands Restoration scheme and I look forward to its outcomes over the next number of years.”

Cllr Catherine Fitzgerald, Cathaoirleach of the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly said, “This call for expressions of interest is a great opportunity for individuals, landowners, and communities to play an active role in making a difference. By restoring nature and our peatlands together, we can build climate resilience and a more sustainable future for ourselves and generations to come."

Clare Bannon, Acting Director of EMRA said, “EMRA has been working closely with the NPWS team over the last number of months, and we are looking forward to the next stages as people across the region get involved and engaged with wetland restoration. Restoration of peatlands is one of our key deliverables as we work to bring the community through a just transition loosening the dependency on peat as a fossil fuel.” Overall the project will spend €12m during its lifetime.

Niall Ó Donnchú, Director General with NPWS said “Engagement and co-operation are the principles on which we depend as we develop initiatives for nature restoration. Tóchar Wetlands Restoration is in the early stages of implementation in the midlands and the Just Transition territory. The National Parks and Wildlife Service wants broad participation in this scheme, to ensure the investment in wetlands and their stakeholders makes a positive impact in as many communities as possible.”

“We hope that people will get involved in Tóchar, so that we can co-operate and build relationships together with the land and its wetlands. Restoration of nature goes hand in hand with improving the resilience of communities, particularly important during this time of climate change. We need to care for the land and its keepers, and this includes the wetlands and their users in the EU Just Transition area,” said Shirley Clerkin, Tóchar Project Manager.

In order to start the process, Tóchar have opened an expression of interest call to landowners, communities and groups to become actively involved in nature restoration for wetlands across the EU Just Transition area. The EU Just Transition Area includes municipal districts in the counties Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath, Roscommon and the Municipal Districts of Ballinasloe (Co Galway), Athy, Clane-Maynooth, (Co Kildare) and Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles (Co Tipperary).

Wetlands are areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface all year or for varying periods of time during the year. The wider midlands hosts a broad diversity of freshwater wetlands such as marshes, fens, bogs, callows and ponds, each playing a crucial role in ecology, climate change mitigation and adaptation, water quality, healthy environments, local communities and economies. With support from Tóchar, nature in the heart of communities across the EU Just Transition territory can be restored with these associated benefits.

To support participants on this restoration journey, Tóchar have created a straightforward step-by step expression of interest form. The Tóchar team will follow up with the necessary assistance to progress projects, whether that be through survey work, restoration planning, interpretation and education or restoration actions on the ground.

Monica Byrne, Project Administrator with Tóchar said: “The author Robin Wall Kimmer once wrote ‘We restore the land, and the land restores us’, and this project takes inspiration from the idea that ecological restoration is inseparable from reconnecting people and the landscape. We believe hope and positivity comes from action, and we wish for many communities in the Just Transition areas to get involved in meaningful action on the ground.”

She indicated the first step any interested community should take is to contact Tóchar. “We ask interested groups (or individuals) to get in touch with us, fill out the expression of interest form, give us whatever information you have, so that we can start connecting and co-operating”

The project is managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service with a project office in Birr, Co. Offaly. The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA), who are the Managing Authority for the EU Just Transition fund.

Notes to Editor

Complete the expression of interest form or for further information please email monicambyrne@npws.gov.ie

Expressions of interest should be returned by email to tocharwetlands@npws.gov.ie or post to Tóchar Wetlands Restoration Scheme, NPWS, Birr Technology Centre, St Brendan’s St., Co. Offaly R42 HX39 by 31 October 2024

**EU Just Transition Fund**

The purpose of the [EU Just Transition Fund (EUJTF)](https://www.emra.ie/eu-jtf/), co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union, is to assist the territories most affected by the transition to a climate-neutral economy. In Ireland, this focuses on the wider Midlands region, where there have been direct impacts from the move away from peat production and electricity generation from peat. Up to €169 million, using Exchequer and EU resources, will be available in the Fund to facilitate a just transition towards a low-carbon economy in the Midlands.

By providing opportunities for employment in the Territory, the EU JTF can help to create an inclusive, attractive, healthy and sustainable place to live, work and visit.

The programme priorities of the EU JTF are as follows:

1. Generating employment for communities formerly reliant on peat production by investing in the diversification of the local economy.

2. Supporting the restoration, regeneration and repurposing of peatlands and related land.

3. Providing former peat communities with smart and sustainable mobility options to enable them to benefit directly from the green transition.

The Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly (EMRA) are the Managing Authority for Ireland’s EU Just Transition Fund Programme. Further information, including programme documentation, and links to information about open and future funding calls, is available on the EMRA website ([www.emra.ie/eu-jtf/](https://www.emra.ie/eu-jtf/)).

**Eligible Territory**

Ireland’s EU Just Transition Fund programme is targeted at the wider Midlands region as it transitions away from peat extraction for energy use. The designated EU JTF territory in Ireland is defined as the counties of Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath, Roscommon and the Municipal Districts of Ballinasloe (Co Galway), Athy, Clane-Maynooth, (Co Kildare) and Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles (Co Tipperary).

Ends.