

ACCESS TO FACILITY-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION



IRELAND

This memo describes the European framework that applies to Ireland as an EU Member State and in the final section discusses and links the country specific implementation of these requirements as well as national variations.

Environmental Information Directive

Ireland is a Member of the European Union and is adapting its environmental laws to the EU norms. It has transposed the [Environmental Information Directive, Directive 2003/4/EC](#). This is a broad-based disclosure requirement that requires transparency for information about the environment.

“The directive defines “information relating to the environment” in a very broad manner, covering “any available information in written, visual, aural or data-base form on the state of water, air, soil, fauna, flora, land and natural sites and on activities or measures adversely affecting, or likely to affect these, and on activities or measures designed to protect these, including administrative measures and environmental management programmes.”¹

The exceptions where disclosure may be denied are actually fairly limited.² The exceptions include, however, criminal and disciplinary proceedings and proceedings by

¹ Resources for the Future, “Public Access to Environmental Information and Data,” 2001, p. 23.

² [Article 4](#): “2. Member States may provide for a request for environmental information to be refused if disclosure of the information would adversely affect: (a) the confidentiality of the proceedings of public authorities, where such confidentiality is provided for by law; (b) international relations, public security or national defence; (c) the course of justice, the ability of any person to receive a fair trial or the ability of a public authority to conduct an enquiry of a criminal or disciplinary nature; (d) the confidentiality of commercial or industrial information where such confidentiality is provided for by national or Community law to protect a legitimate economic interest, including the public interest in maintaining statistical confidentiality and tax secrecy; (e) intellectual property rights; (f) the confidentiality of personal data and/or files relating to a natural person where that person has not consented to the disclosure of the information to the public, where such confidentiality is provided for by national or Community law; (g) the interests or protection of any person who supplied the information requested on a voluntary basis without being under, or capable of being put under, a legal obligation to do so, unless that person has consented to the release of the information concerned; (h) the protection of the environment to which such information relates, such as the location of rare species.” (emphasis added).

public authorities which are confidential under national law.³ This particular exception varies widely by Member State in its implementation. Preliminary investigations can also be excluded. However, the Court of Justice for the European Union has indicated that the reason for confidentiality of certain public proceedings – even where set by national law – may not apply after the proceedings are resolved. See [Flachglas Torgau GmbH v Germany](#), C-204-09, February 14, 2012. Actions related to imminent threats to public health or the environment are also mandated for disclosure. See Article 7(4). The Aarhus Convention⁴ requires that the interest of disclosure of public proceedings must be balanced against the need for confidentiality in each case, so that a blanket exemption is not the intent of the EU Directive implementing the Convention.⁵ All restrictions on disclosure are discretionary with each Member State and national authorities are not necessarily compelled to have the same exemptions in their individual country's laws. See "National Law" section below.

European-Pollutant Release & Transfer Registry

In line with the Aarhus Convention and the EU EID, all emissions data must be publicly available. The EU also maintains the online European Pollutant Release and Transfer Registry or E-PRTR which requires by regulation ([Regulation EC No. 166/2006](#)) the reporting of releases – both accidental and deliberate – to the air, water or soil. E-PRTR searches can be done [online](#). The data base is about two years out of date, but it can be useful to identify past problems at facilities. Reports of discharges or releases from facilities are themselves not confidential under EU law and can also be readily obtained from each Member State.

National Law

Ireland has transposed the EU Directive and implemented the Aarhus Convention through a couple of different measures. To get access to environmental information you can use [Freedom of Information \(FOI\)](#) legislation or the [European Communities \(Access to Information on the Environment\) Regulations 2007 to 2014 \(AIE Regulations\)](#). These

³ There is no explicit authority to include administrative enforcement measures within this definition of exceptions. However, the European Court has ruled that proceedings with possible penalties may come within the exemption. See [Mecklenburg v. Pinneberg](#), C-321-96, 1998 ECRI 3809, 3835. After the matter is resolved by officials, the reason for the exemption is arguably no longer valid. See [Flachglas Torgau, supra](#).

⁴ The [Aarhus Convention](#) on access to justice in environmental matters also has relevant disclosure requirements. The objective is the right to participate in environmental decision-making and the information covered includes administrative measures by public authorities affecting the environment. See Article 2 (definitions). Most of this convention has been incorporated into the Environmental Information Directive at this point.

⁵ See Dirk Bunker, DEFICITS IN US AND EU MANDATORY ENVIRONMENTAL DISCLOSURE, (Springer 2011), p. 141.

Regulations give effect in Ireland to the [AIE Directive](#), which was adopted to give effect to the Access to Information pillar of the [Aarhus Convention](#).

Ireland had a decision on the applicability of its disclosure law to the courts and found that it did not apply. [Administrative agencies have to comply with requests not the courts]. The Commissioner for Environmental Information made a decision in appeal reference CEI/08/05, which is available on www.ocei.ie. The case related to environmental information held by the Courts Service. The Commissioner found that, in the case in question, the Courts Service was acting on behalf of the Courts who were acting in a judicial capacity in relation to the information at issue. Accordingly, the Commissioner had no jurisdiction to direct the release of the environmental information sought.

The regulations have a somewhat broader definition of the enforcement exception than the Directive. Section 12.3 states:

Environmental information relating to anything which is the subject matter of any legal proceedings, or of any formal inquiry (whether past or present), or any preliminary investigation, may be refused. Examples would include information in connection with intended prosecution of offences by the Director of Public Prosecutions or by local or other public authorities; information affecting enforcement proceedings; material arising from public or disciplinary inquiries; and information relating to preliminary or other proceedings instituted by the European Commission.

The exception to disclosure is not mandatory and should balance the public interest with the interest of confidentiality. If the facility has received the information, it is hard to argue any prejudice from its public disclosure. If the information refers to exceedance of statutory pollution levels, then its disclosure is mandatory under other provisions.

A guidance document on the Regulations is available on the Irish Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government website at the following web address:

<http://www.environ.ie/en/AboutUs/AccessToInformationontheEnvironment/RHLegislation/FileDownload,2481,en.pdf>

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