

Pioneering projects predict CAP post-2020

Lessons learned here show how environmental initiatives can be designed to work for both farmers and the environment

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At the Teagasc environment conference in December, Dr James Moran of GMIT said proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy post-2020 include the potential for increased flexibility to facilitate the development of more locally adapted and targeted environmental policies.

Ireland has already played a key role in relation to the innovative design of agri-environment schemes like the Burren programmes and more recently through the innovative delivery model of European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs).

"Ireland has a unique opportunity to realise a truly locally-adapted results-orientated agri-environment programme to meet the enhanced ambitions of the CAP post-2020," he concluded.

Ger Shortle (then at the European Commission and now a Teagasc regional manager) said that the new CAP has greater ambitions for climate action and environmental care.

"There is a strong emphasis on subsidiarity and simplification, that means more autonomy for member states in developing their own

approach to implementing the CAP while making the whole process simpler for farmers."

Jack Nolan from the DAFM said sustainable agriculture can continue to protect and improve our environment while facilitating the growth of the agricultural sector. He explained that Ireland's EIP programme is among the most ambitious of any member state. The Hen Harrier Scheme, together with the Fresh Water Pearl Mussel Scheme, will have a combined budget of €35m.

A total of 22 smaller EIPs have now been selected with a total budget of €24m with the support of the EU Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. The projects focus on the environmental priorities of biodiversity, climate change and water quality.

This type of funding had been requested for many years and the challenge now is to get these projects through from startup to deliver real benefits to the environment, local communities and farmers working in these areas. The Teagasc environment conference heard from a number of speakers with practical experience in making their locally led projects a success.

Burren

Burren farmer and local advocate Michael Davoren described what the Burren means to people who live and work there and how important it is to preserve the heritage, tradition and way of farming there.

Dr Bendan Dunford who has worked on the Burren Programme almost from its inception says that the programme was the brainchild of the Burren IFA group who negotiated a Burren REPS agreement in the mid-90s, which followed by a Teagasc Walsh Fellowship project from 1998 to 2001.



ABOVE: Female hen harrier. Picture by Barry O'Donoghue

LEFT: Pat Cassidy, farmer participant in Burren Programme, with Martin Feerick Teagasc Burren programme planner.



The Burren Life project carried through from 2005 to 2010, during which farmers and researchers came up with practical solutions to issues such as scrub encroachment, feeding silage on winterages and water provision.

The success of Burren Life led to DAFM allocating €1m per annum to Burren farmers for six years.

A new results-based measure was introduced to complement the action-based approach of Burren Life. This hybrid programme adopted a very farmer centred approach and its success led to the further expansion of the Burren Programme in 2016 through Pillar II of the RDP.

It currently includes 330 farmers managing in excess of 22,000ha of land. Brendan Dunford emphasised a number of lessons which have been learned:

- The need to be much better at understanding and engaging with farmers: for example by having a more equitable reward system; allowing more freedom to farm; providing local support; requiring less bureaucracy; celebrating success and not penalising failure.

- Move beyond compensating farmers for stopping negative practices; instead incentivise positive management by paying for the delivery of clearly defined and measurable environmental outputs and results.

Aran Life

Patrick McGurn spoke about the development of Aran Life and the subsequent creation of Caomhnú Árann EIP. With up to 75% of the Aran Islands designated under the EU Habitats Regulation, implementing generic agri-environment measures did not always meet the needs of the farmers or indeed maintain, or enhance, the habitat.

This led to the formation of the Aran Life project (2014-2018). This project worked with 67 farmers on three islands to combat poor access to fields, fields with high levels of scrub limiting grazing, and insufficient water infrastructure and mineral deficiencies in livestock.

The project also looked at the link between agriculture and tourism by conducting surveys of tourists and farmers. The surveys showed a strong correlation between tourism and the

landscape that is maintained by the farming system, highlighting services which were supplied by agriculture but were not rewarded through the marketplace.

Aran Life was a targeted project with specific objectives that reflected the requirements of the habitats involved. It recognised that further actions were necessary as the economics of farming were not favourable to maintaining the condition of the habitats.

It was from this that Caomhnú Árann was developed and it will try to make innovative application of technology to reduce the administrative cost of the project. The main tools will be an outcome-based, simplified priority habitat scoring system associated with capital actions for habitat improvement.

The scoring system will be linked to remote sensing using drone technology to reduce the administrative cost of the project, increase the quantity and uniformity of habitat assessments and increase farmer involvement.

They will also examine non-subsidy methods of improving farm income

for example by developing innovative ways to deliver mineral supplementation targeted to most at-risk cattle to improve animal performance.

They also plan to 'monetise' the value of species rich grasslands by developing them as a source of seed for regeneration and remediation of degraded habitats in other areas.

Hen harriers

Fergal Monaghan from the Hen Harrier Project spoke about the challenges of establishing the largest EIP in the country with a budget of €25m, 3,760 farmers on 55,000ha of land stretching from the Galway/Clare border to Tipperary through to west Limerick, north Kerry and north Cork. Measures to halt the decline in bird populations including the moratorium on new forestry have been contentious and are seen by many as devaluing their land.

The programme in the Hen Harrier SPAs was planned to supplement the support available through the GLAS scheme. The initial development stage is at an end. "The next stage is building a programme that goes beyond a scheme and that works for, and with, communities across the country to take charge of a sustainable farming for nature approach," concludes Fergal.

As environmental protection and climate change initiatives become ever more important it is encouraging that initiatives are placing greater importance on working with farmers and rural communities.