

environment

Forming commonage groups through SUAS

Farmers in Glassamullen commonage in the Wicklow uplands set up a formal commonage group under SUAS to manage their commonage as a group rather than individuals for the first time in their lives

Declan Byrne
SUAS Project Manager,
on secondment from Teagasc

SUAS is the Sustainable Uplands Agriculture-environment Scheme pilot project, which was launched by the Wicklow Uplands Council in 2019. The aim is to rejuvenate stock numbers and enhance vegetation management on the hills. The five-year project received €1.95m in funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, under the EIP AGRI initiative.

“The first step was for us to form a formal commonage group, complete with constitution and officers,” says farmer George Power. “We worked with an ecologist working on the project, Faith Wilson, to develop a com-

monage management plan. People are more likely to “buy into” a plan they have helped to develop and it means everyone is working towards common objectives rather than each farmer doing his own thing.”

SUAS has pioneered this co-design approach on commonages, and has already completed the process with seven commonages. As a result, SUAS has been able to produce a “Guide on how to form commonage groups” and a template for developing their constitutions.

George Power is one of five farmers who has rights in Glassamullen commonage, just south of Enniskerry, and one of the first three commonages to join the SUAS project. The commonage also includes lands within the boundaries of the Wicklow Mountains National Park owned by



the state, and other land owned by the Powerscourt Estate. Coillte also has grazing rights but it is not currently exercising them.

The lands within the commonage are of international importance for the habitats and species they contain and hence are included within the boundaries of the Wicklow Mountains Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Wicklow Mountains Special Protection Area (SPA). The commonage provides access to the Wicklow uplands and is used by large numbers of hill walkers, particularly at the weekends.

The five farmers in Glassamullen commonage applied to join the SUAS project, and went through a series of meetings with the project manager and a facilitator. They formed their commonage group and adopted their constitution on 2 January 2019, appointing Peter Molloy as chair, George Power as secretary and Johnny Power as treasurer.

“This was the first time that everybody on the commonage met at the same time to talk about the commonage,” says George Power. “We had always talked informally among ourselves about sheep going up or down, but we never really had a chance to plan anything.”

“It’s good to have everybody involved,” adds Peter Molloy. “One person can’t really do much on their own.”

The first task for the commonage group was to walk the commonage with Faith Wilson to discuss, from a



Peter Molloy and Richard Turner discussing their commonage with Minister Andrew Doyle and project manager Declan Byrne ahead of the official launch of the SUAS project in November 2018.

Enda Mullen, divisional ecologist at the National Parks and Wildlife Service, speaking on the uplands above Glenasmole Valley.



farming and an ecological perspective, what is there, why it is important and how it should be managed.

“We soon realised that what we both want is not too far apart,” says Faith Wilson. “One shareholder remarked that even though the commonage is an SAC, an SPA and part of Wicklow Mountains National Park, which was created almost 30 years ago, this was the first time anybody had come out to tell the farmers why their commonage received all these designations and how they should be managing it.”

In consultation with Faith Wilson, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the SUAS project manager, a management plan was agreed for the commonage. The plan focuses on bracken control, rejuvenating areas of tall leggy heather through cutting and controlled burning, and improving grazing management, particularly over the winter.

In February 2019, with support from the SUAS project manager, the Glassamullen Commonage Group carried out “controlled burning” on a targeted area of the commonage. In advance, fire control lines were cut in the heather by a local contractor to allow small areas to be burned and the fire to be controlled.

The SUAS project provided training equipment and safety gear to the farmers.



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Declan Byrne, project manager of the SUAS pilot project, delivering a presentation at the Glenasmole Community Centre.



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All necessary notifications and paperwork were completed in advance.

“There was a lot more involved in controlled burning than we expected,” says George Power. “You need at least five people for the controlled burning and it is very difficult to organise, but the heather is recovering much quicker on the areas that were burned than on the areas that were mechanically cut.”

Sheep numbers grazing over the winter increased and areas were targeted for grazing using sheep feed buckets, purchased by the SUAS project on behalf of the farmers. These buckets are used to entice sheep that were not on the hill earlier in the year to move up the hill for grazing rather than remaining around the grassy areas at the bottom.

A 2ha area was targeted for bracken control in 2019. While the farmers themselves didn't have suitable machinery, a local contractor was sourced to spray the area using a tractor mounted sprayer with Asulox herbicide. The commonage group identified the areas to be sprayed, sourced the contractor, improved access on to the hill and were on hand on the day to identify hazards such as rocks and holes to prevent damage to the machinery.

Innovation

One of the main reasons cited by farmers for not putting sheep out on the commonage is the work involved

in going to look at them. Some farmers work off-farm; some are not physically able for it; and some haven't the time. An optional innovation in the SUAS project is a payment for communal shepherding of the sheep on the commonage.

The new measure involves paying one farmer to go up the commonage to shepherd everybody's sheep; other graziers don't need to go up there as often. The person doing the shepherding would be decided by the commonage group and the job can be rotated around or someone can be hired in to do it if required.

The farmers on Glasnamullen commonage chose to look after their own sheep. Both George and Peter thought it was great to be rewarding the farmers actually grazing the commonage and that the payment should be available to everybody to look after their own sheep.

It is expected at the end of this five-year project to have the farmers on these commonages working together to create a more sustainable future for themselves and for the habitats they are farming. There will also be a better understanding of how to support them in a way that delivers the benefits to those who are actively farming and managing these habitats for future agri and agri-environmental schemes.

The importance of our uplands and the preservation of its healthy, thriving biodiversity, cannot be underestimated. The work of the SUAS project is to discover and promote the best approaches and methods for land management, to create a better understanding of the appropriate grazing and to better support hill-farming communities.

The story of commonage

Catherine Keena
Teagasc Countryside
Management Specialist

There are up to 15,000 farmers in Ireland farming 4,500 commonages on over 340,000 hectares. Approximately sixty per cent have a nature designation (Natura). Increased stocking rates in the 1980s in response to headage payments led to some overgrazing.

In an effort to address this, over 4,400 commonage framework plans were prepared, covering more than 440,000 hectares during the period from 1998 to 2002, and where necessary destocking was prescribed and implemented through Agri-Environment Schemes such as REPS, AEOS and the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme.

The Single Farm Payment introduced in 2003 resulted in a reduction in sheep numbers on commonage. Some areas now suffer from undergrazing.

Key principles

The current agri-environment scheme GLAS incorporated two new key principles. For the first time, a Sustainable Stocking Rate is the target. Secondly, the GLAS commonage management plans aim for this sustainable stocking rate on a collective basis for each commonage.

There are currently five upland European Innovation Projects: Wicklow (SUAS); Carlow (Blackstairs Farming Futures); Donegal (Inishowen Uplands EIP); Galway (North Connemara Locally Led EIP); and Kerry (MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP), addressing how farmers can deliver the optimal balance of food and other increasingly recognisable high value ecosystem services, by developing a “least cost” farming system to maintain our uplands in “Favourable Conservation Status”.

A report on facilitation process, a template for commonage group constitutions and a how-to guide on forming commonage groups have all been completed by the SUAS project and are available on <http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/suas-reports/>