

## Inishowen Upland Farmers project

**This Irish Operational Group aims to improve the economic sustainability of farming High Nature Value (HNV) land in Inishowen (North-West coast of Ireland). The partners are testing the implementation of a range of innovative measures which also deliver on environmental sustainability by increasing biodiversity, improving water quality and combating climate change.**

Inishowen is dominated by High Nature Value farmland (HNV) and it is currently facing many difficulties. While tradition and culture mean that farming will continue in the Inishowen peninsula, most of the farms are not currently capable of generating a sufficient income. Many farmers have off-farm income and in keeping with national and EU trends, the age profile of farmers and lack of a successor is a concern.

In parallel to this, much of the uplands and mountains in Inishowen are covered in blanket bog. Conservation and proper management of this wetland, along with climate mitigation measures on improved lowland, would yield a number of important environmental benefits such as good quality water, carbon sequestration, high-quality biodiversity and flood mitigation. Farmers play an important role in this.



To maintain economic sustainability for the farmers in this area, new thinking is therefore required. The partners of this Operational Group decided to explore this concept: "If there could be some tangible return for the production of public goods, the long-term sustainability of these farms could be increased."

It is being increasingly recognised that farming using sustainable practices brings a multitude of benefits for many sectors including agricultural produce, local commerce, open space for tourists and urban dwellers, preserving history and culture, clean air, clean water and water retention and carbon sequestration.

The ultimate aim of this Operational Group is therefore to increase farm profitability to ensure that the farming activity that is carried out is contributing to overall household income, not a drain on it. In addition, it will demonstrate that these economic improvements can be achieved in tandem with delivering on climate change, biodiversity and water quality.

The project is experimenting with innovative practices in managing upland habitat including agroforestry and climate-smart innovation on the improved lowland. The partners will produce a best practice management template to increase farm profitability. It will also demonstrate that by adopting a whole farm approach that addresses both the economic and environmental aspects of mountainous areas and improved lowland on the farm will lead to better long-term outcomes.

Partners are working with a number of participating farmers, creating with each of them a farm plan using data collected from spatial mapping of their farm. The plan covers the following:

- Integrate suitable broadleaved woodland into their improved land to improve the hydrology of the area
- Plant trees and hedges to provide shelter belts

- Incorporate clover and trial alternative legumes, apply lime to build soil fertility to reduce the use of chemical fertilisers
- Trial red clover swards for silage production
- Create multi-purpose ponds
- Trial experimental grazing regimes with cattle, where sheep are traditionally grazed, to establish ideal conditions for optimum management and production of biodiverse upland vegetation
- Prescribe wetland restoration.

In terms of results, the project expects to increase profitability for the participating farmers, improve upland habitat condition, increase flood resilience and water infiltration as well as carbon sequestration, enhanced nutrient management and capture and reduce dependence on chemical nitrogen fertiliser. A particular benefit of the project will be providing options/opportunities for people to stay and continue to farm and manage the land. They intend to demonstrate that there is a real benefit in this to the local economy and to the country as a whole.

James Breslin, demonstration farm owner says: "We are very pleased with how the Galloway cattle are performing on the uplands and with the growth rates in my diverse swards."

Partners will generate practical recommendations for best practice in upland management.



*Partners of this project are: INHFA, a nationwide organisation which aims to highlight the challenges faced by farmers in the more marginalised areas of the country; and Teagasc's Forestry Development Department, which provides integrated forestry research, advisory and education services allowing for rapid and effective dissemination of research through knowledge transfer and educational initiatives.*

### Sources for this article

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