

## IRELAND

# Biodiversity's restoration, preservation & enhancement

### Location

Connemara

### Programming period

2014 – 2020

### Priority

P4 – Ecosystems  
management

### Measure

M16 - Cooperation

### Funding (EUR)

Total budget 1 424 284  
EAFRD 894 450  
National/Reg. 529 834

### Project duration

2020 – 2022

### Project promoter

FORUM Connemara CLG

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### Website

[www.forumconnemara.ie/locally-led-scheme](http://www.forumconnemara.ie/locally-led-scheme)

The North Connemara Locally Led Agri-Environmental Scheme is a local agricultural scheme to incentivise farmers to incorporate agricultural animals in improving the ecology of their land.

## Summary

The Twelve Bens/Maum Turks is a unique upland landscape which covers over 30 000 ha in North Connemara and is home to many important and rare flora and fauna. The area is extensively farmed and the main animal farmed is the Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain sheep breed. Farmers in the area decided to take part in a local agricultural scheme, which is a bottom-up approach to increase the sustainability of upland farming.

All participant farmers joined management groups to improve social inclusion in the scheme. Data are collected through the scheme to showcase the benefits of farming to the ecology of the uplands. Specific data are collected on the Blackface sheep breed, showcasing the benefit of the animal to the uplands and increasing the marketing opportunity of the breed as an ecological tool. Combined, these approaches will increase the productivity of upland farming and therefore increase its economic sustainability.



## Results

80 participants are expected to join the scheme. Of these, approximately 80% are sheep farmers.

Supported by the project, shepherds will increase the amount of data recorded on their farms, leading to easier management, improved flock health and showcasing the benefit of the Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain breed as a tool for improving the ecological structure of an upland area.

The participants use livestock to improve flora diversity in areas where a single species of plant is creating a monoculture. This will increase the biodiversity on the uplands, increase the grazing platform on these uplands and therefore reduce areas that may be damaged due to preferential grazing.

A pilot educational programme has been rolled out to the primary school students in the region based on upland farming, the importance of the uplands as areas of carbon sinks and sequestration.

## Context

The Twelve Bens/Maum Turks is a unique upland landscape which covers over 30 000 ha in North Connemara. A high percentage of the area has been designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) due to the important habitats that are found in the area, such as Blanket bog, wet heaths, dry heaths and oligotrophic waters. These habitats are home to many important and rare flora and fauna. The area is extensively farmed by private landowners and commonage shareholders. The main animal farmed is the Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain sheep breed.

The Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain sheep is a very hardy breed well suited to the upland landscape. However, farming this animal does not produce a level of financial return that justifies a continuation of the levels of work that needs to be carried out before an end product is achieved. As a result, the habitats are under threat from land abandonment due to socio-economic issues, such as the profitability of the farms and the ageing population of the farmers in the area. If the economic sustainability of farming, in an ecologically positive manner does not increase, then the ecological quality of the important habitats in the area will be reduced. Abandonment, although a threat in the future, is not currently a widespread problem in the project area. This will change if the economic sustainability of farming in the area does not increase. Returning an abandoned upland area to good quality will come with a significant financial cost. Improving the sustainability of farming in the area at present is a more economically viable option.

## Objectives

The project aims to increase the sustainability of upland farming. Farmers will be incentivised to incorporate agricultural animals to improve the ecology of their farmland. The sheep farmers will also be encouraged to make management changes to their Blackface Mountain sheep flock.

## Activities

Farmers in the area have signed up to a local agricultural scheme, a bottom-up approach created specifically for the Maum Turk and Twelve Bens Mountain ranges. Farmers in the area will be carrying out actions specific to the area and adjusted to their individual farm. The project is broken down into four specific initiatives:

Habitat conservation will be an on the ground approach

specific to each area farmed by a participating farmer. The area will be surveyed by an ecologist who will flag areas for improvement and farmers will be incentivised to carry out the prescribed works. These works can include but are not limited to:

- the control and removal of invasive species;
- reducing preferential grazing seen on some sites by grazing animals;
- increasing the level of mixed grazing using sheep, cattle, and/or horses;
- increased level of shepherding using new technologies such as mineral buckets;
- incorporating technology to identify grazing trends; and
- increasing the grazing platform by controlling the spreading of scrub, such as *Pteridium aquilinum*.

The support for such actions will ensure that farmers are paid for producing and maintaining a product that is important to the specific and unique landscape of the area.

Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain sheep are the predominant breed being farmed in the project area. This breed of animal is seen as the most suited to farming a landscape such as the Maum Turks and Twelve Bens. Currently, these animals are farmed extensively, and very little data is being recorded at farm level. Farmers in the scheme will be incentivised to improve the recording of data being carried out on the flocks. This will also help to improve the health of the animals and reduce the unnecessary administration of medication to the sheep. Reducing unnecessary dosing will reduce the risk of increasing the level of internal parasites that are resistant to chemical treatment. Keeping sheep healthy for longer will reduce the burden on the farmer and allow greater ease of managing the flock on the uplands.

Time management is a big issue for farmers in the project area due to the terrain and altitude of their lands. Incorporating technology to reduce this burden will be looked at in the project area. Drone technology will allow for quicker shepherding of the sheep. Technology based around the electronic animal tags has a lot of interesting possibilities which can lead to a greater level of control and identification of the grazing animals in a specific area. GPS fencing will also be trialled. Due to restrictions on planning, farmers cannot erect new fences adjacent to public roads. Using GPS fencing will allow for the reintroduction of cattle on the hill which has not been possible due to the danger posed to motorists.

Management groups will be created to increase the amount of social interaction with the farmers in the region. These groups will allow farmers to come together to voice their concerns in relation to farming in the area. It will also allow for increased networking opportunities between local farmers. It is perceived that by bringing farmers together in this type of environment they will take ownership of the project. This may lead to more informal ecological and economic growth and therefore a sustainable future for farming in the region.

Invasive alien species are a threat in numerous upland habitats in Ireland. This is also the case in the project area. Currently, the biggest problem is the growth and spread of *Rhododendron Ponticum* which was imported into the area as a decorative plant. *Rhododendron* thrives in the area due to the climate and acidity of the soil. Due to this, the plant has colonised a large area in the north of the catchment. Farmers will be trained in best practice removal techniques based on works that have been carried out in the Killarney National park. These works include treating plants in situ, while reducing the risk of damage to the habitat. Farmers will also be supplied with the tools to tackle the rhododendron problem.

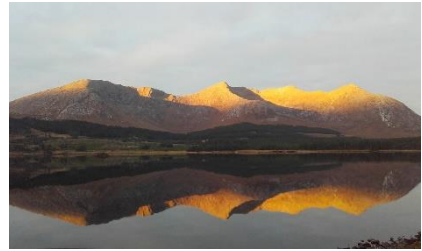
An educational programme is also being created for the local primary school students. The project is based around the importance of agriculture to the area and also the importance of agriculture in the protection of these unique carbon sinks.

### Main results

The project is in its first year and will be running for the next three years. Farmers will be receiving results-based payments on the work completed. 80 participants are expected to join the scheme. Of these, approximately 80% are sheep farmers.

Shepherds will be increasing the amount of data recording being carried out on their farms, leading to easier management, improving flock health and showcasing the benefit of the Blackface Mayo/Connemara mountain breed as a tool for improving the ecological structure of an upland area.

The participants will be using livestock to improve flora diversity in areas where a single species of plant is creating a monoculture. This will increase the biodiversity on the uplands, increase the grazing platform on these uplands and therefore reduce areas that may be damaged due to preferential grazing. Tracking technology will be used to determine the number of animals that will follow a feed source into a different area. This data will determine the effect of certain feed sources as tools for supplementation shepherding.



The scheme is run by a local rural development company, FORUM Connemara CLG and its project team, with a local knowledge of farming and living in the area. This is coupled with a steering committee that has years of experience in the areas of conservation, environmental economy and local historical legislation and agricultural trends. All of these different individuals have added to the implementation of the project.

A pilot educational programme has been rolled out to the primary school students in the region based on upland farming, the importance of the uplands as areas of carbon sinks and sequestration. Part of the educational programme is to introduce the importance of pollinators in a local, national and global sense and will be introducing the students and schools to the 'All-Ireland pollinator plan'.

The technology and data produced by this project will be easily transferred to other areas with similar problems. This project has a bottom-up approach where numerous areas are being worked on to produce improvements in sustainable agriculture. Other similar upland areas can pick different actions from this project, thus creating a template for projects in other areas.

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### Additional sources of information

[www.facebook.com/NorthConnemaraEIP](https://www.facebook.com/NorthConnemaraEIP)