



FARMING WITH NATURE SCHEME

UFU PROPOSAL

SEPTEMBER 2021

Introduction

Over the past months, the UFU Environment Committee have been working on developing a proposal for a new voluntary agri-environment scheme that would replace the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) in the post Brexit policy period. The UFU wish to take a proactive approach in designing a future scheme rather than waiting for a DAERA consultation on this issue.

There are a number of environmental challenges that farmers can tackle, and this scheme aims to deliver improvements on water quality, reduction in greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions, improve carbon sequestration and improve biodiversity.

The proposed scheme outlined below has been developed with the key objective of delivering for both the farmer and the environment with a focus on a results based/outcome approach with options available for all sectors in every part of Northern Ireland.

This is a 'living document' and will be updated as more information becomes available.

Budget

The Environment Committee felt it was important to focus on key principles and objectives rather than get distracted debating costs, payments and budgets at this stage. This can be developed further later.

Background

Farming has shaped our landscape in Northern Ireland creating different environments which support our economy, rural communities, tourism and recreation. Local farmers manage approximately 78% of the total NI land area of 1.35m ha and not only help to manage the environment but produce high quality safe and affordable food for around 10 million people.

This document illustrates what UFU has always been about namely, forward thinking, positive and down to earth. The document is a blueprint for supporting farmers as we seek to develop our agriculture systems in a sustainable manner for the benefit of both rural and urban dwellers. Farmers aim to grow healthy food and safeguard the environment for the next generation.

If local food can be delivered through efficient and productive farming, more land can be made available for nature therefore the key to delivering a successful agri-environmental scheme is having a complementary policy to further on-farm efficiencies and productivity.

Farmers in Northern Ireland have embraced agri-environment schemes over the years. Between 2007-2013 the Agri-environment Programme supported on average 11,699 farm holdings and 433,263 hectares (around 43% of agricultural land in Northern Ireland) with the aim of enhancing biodiversity, improving water quality, enhancing the landscape and mitigating climate change. with a peak in participation at the end of 2009, with 12,600 participants and 468,000 hectares of agricultural land under agreement.

From 2014, the Environmental Farming Scheme was developed. There was a delay before applications were accepted which resulted in many farmers who had previously been involved in the agri-environment programme dropping out of contract. There have now been five tranches of the EFS opened for application, but farmers have been restricted in the amount of environmental works they can do in the wider scheme due to the cap imposed by DAERA and many farmers have been turned away from the higher scheme due to a lack of DAERA resource to process applications. Other frustrations have resulted in a lower-than-expected interest in the scheme. There have been some positives to EFS resulting in new environmental works taking place on over 5000 farms.

UFU committees have discussed and debated the positives and negatives of the Environmental Farming Scheme since it was introduced and its predecessors. These points have been noted and this proposed 'Farming with Nature Scheme' aims to build on the positives of the past agri-environment schemes.

Why do we need agri-environment schemes?

Agri-environment schemes are a key mechanism to help farmers and society to address the range of environmental challenges we are facing. It is generally not economically viable on most farms to solely improve the environment and, the marketplace does not reward such projects and actions. Agri-environment schemes help to reward farmers for the public goods they are providing, improve the environment and they also help to raise environmental awareness in the farming community. The environment should become a 'profit centre' for farm businesses.

General statement of environmental intent

The UFU wish to deliver:

- A more sustainable agricultural sector in Northern Ireland which delivers improved environmental, economic and social outcomes.
- Higher levels of environmental compliance throughout the agricultural sector, resulting in a healthier environment and reduced requirement for enforcement activity.

- Continual improvements in the environment through increased numbers of waterbodies achieving “good status”, improved conservation status of priority habitats & species and improved biodiversity in the wider countryside.
- Increased farm sustainability through innovative resource efficient practices.
- Increased awareness that good environmental practice can unlock commercial advantages to help meet the growing demands of competitive global agricultural markets.
- Interdisciplinary partnership approach and enhanced stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes and sustainable land use management

UFU accepts that the climate is changing, farmers are at the forefront of that change and that agriculture is an emitter of both ammonia and greenhouse gases and these must be reduced.

UFU believes that it is possible to ameliorate negative effects of the intensive grass-based production system that is Northern Ireland agriculture.

UFU strategic objectives of an Agri-Environment Policy

In general, an agri-environment scheme should provide the dual benefits of improving farm incomes and improving environmental sustainability. The UFU believe that the following will also be delivered through the proposed ‘Farming with Nature’ Scheme:

1. Contribute to climate change mitigation by reducing GHG emissions and raising the level of carbon sequestration.
2. Improve and maintain air quality (reduce ammonia emissions).
3. Protect, maintain and improve water quality.
4. Protect and maintain biodiversity.
5. Maintain and improve soil health and fertility.
6. Enhance the farmed landscape and on-farm historic features resulting in benefits for tourism.
7. Deliver farm efficiencies.
8. Support family farms.

Farming with Nature Scheme

Key principles agreed by the Environment Committee that must be delivered by the proposed scheme:

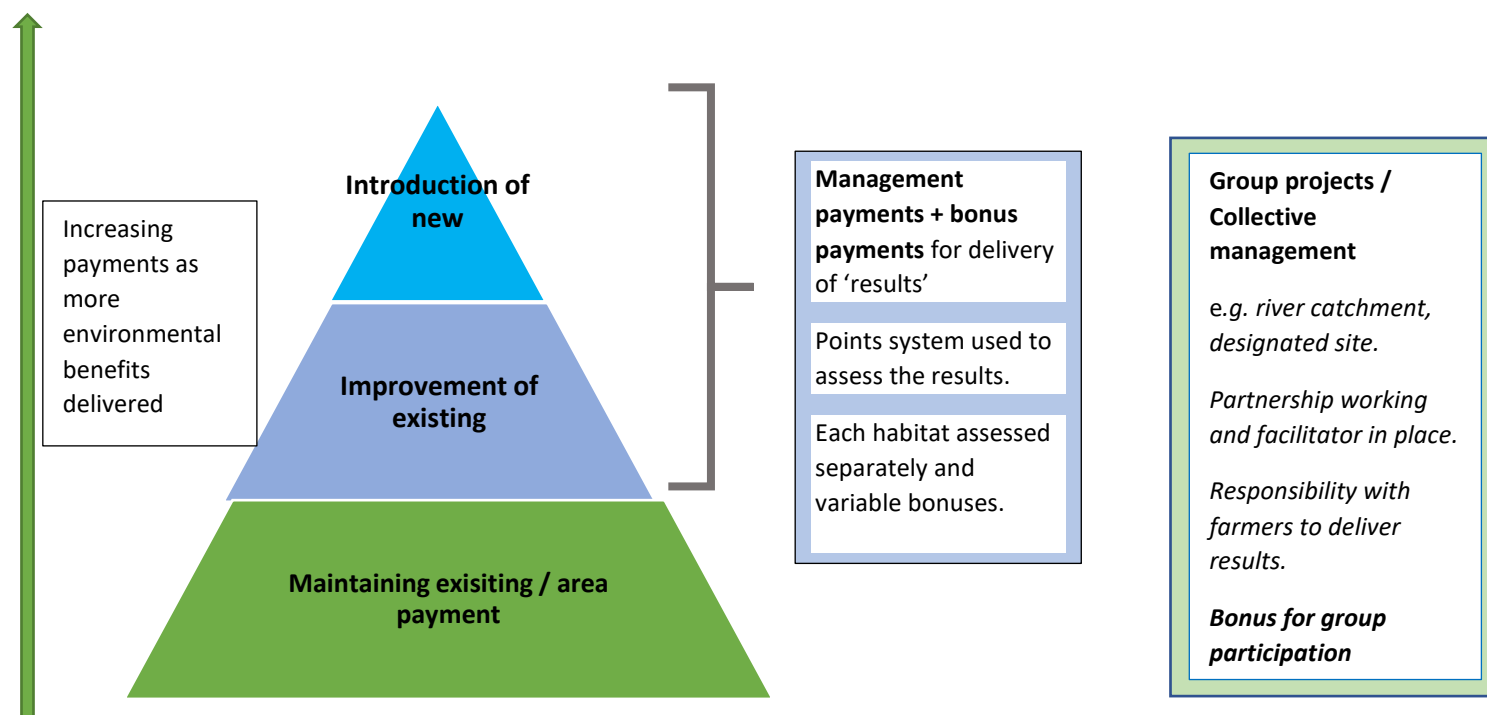
- Voluntary
- Simplicity
- Practical
- Financially attractive
- Options for all farmers regardless of sector, size, land type or intensity.
- Partnership approach – less prescriptive measures and more working with farmers to deliver results.

- Farmer involvement in the design of measures – more responsibility given to the farmer to deliver environmental improvement.
- Threat of penalties and inspection minimised.
- Productive agriculture can continue in conjunction with this scheme.
- Reward and incentivise environmental outcomes.
- Environmental consultants should not be necessary.

How will the proposed 'Farming with Nature Scheme' work?

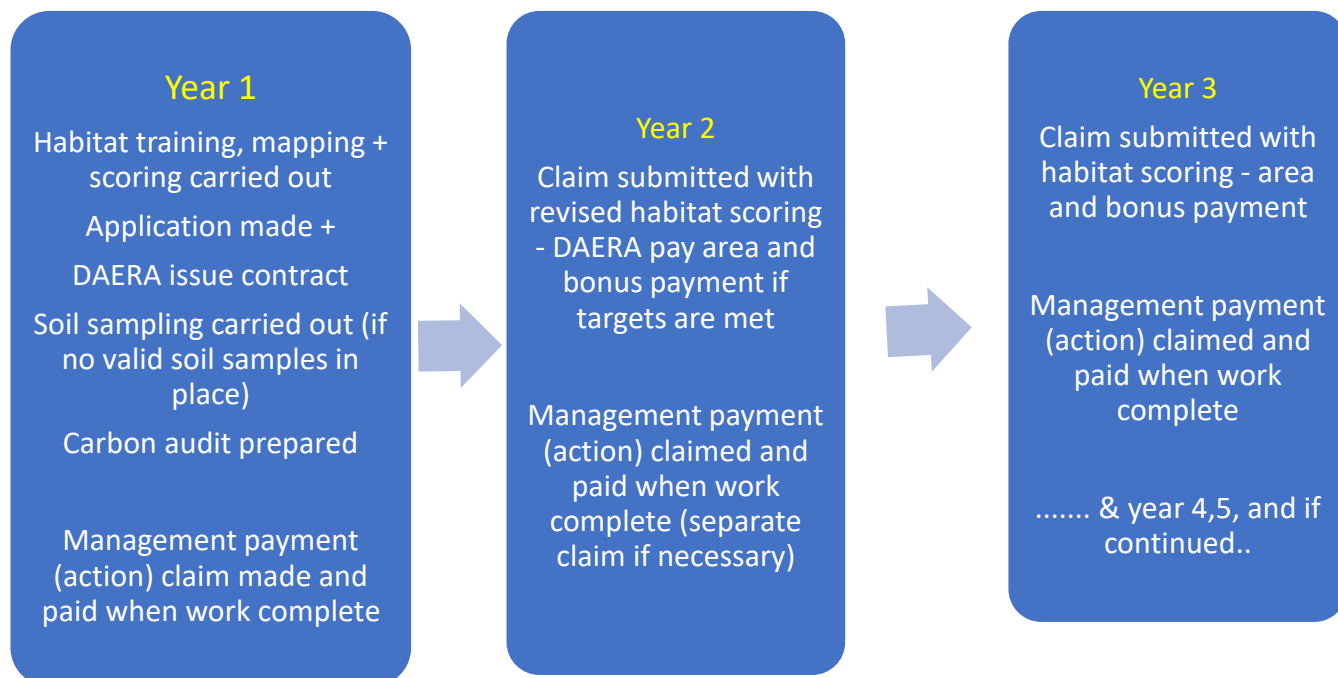
- The scheme will be delivered through three levels as outlined below (Figure 1):
 - Maintaining existing
 - Improving Existing
 - Introducing new
- Farmers will select how much land they wish to enter into the scheme and how much work they want to carry out. The more options selected, the higher the payment will be.
- The scheme will largely focus on delivering and paying for environmental results.
- Farmers will score their various environmental commitments against a scale agreed and explained through information packs, communication tools, training events and local advisers.
- Farmers operating in group projects, Business Discussion Groups or specific 'Farming with Nature Groups' can peer review the scoring. This is not an obligation but may help confidence and knowledge.
- Each habitat and score will have a payment allocated and farmers will submit a claim and are paid accordingly with spot checks carried out by DAERA.
- There will be an incentive to strive towards maximum environmental outcomes early in the scheme to achieve maximum points and therefore maximum payment – this will deliver more for the environment and the farmer.
- There will be a support provided for more capital-intensive environmental actions such as fencing, tree planting etc. It is recognised that without this it may be prohibitive.
- Annex 1 provides a draft list of measures for each level of the proposed scheme.
- Contracts will be awarded by DAERA for 5 years with the option to extend for further 5 years without a full re-application. Additional land could be included after year 5.
- The scheme is only open to active farmers.
- Other longer-term environmental commitments will fall outside of this scheme e.g. re-wetting / forestry – longer contracts and high financial reward needed due to generational commitments.
- Environmental works will be done as and when the farmers chose, and the farmers can select how they reach the environmental outcome/target as opposed to following a list of prescriptive requirements.
- Changes to claiming payments – farmers claim for the capital items when the work is completed. Annual payments will be made based on area and 'scoring' and the submission of a claim at an agreed date (this could vary for applicants in allow for a rolling workload for DAERA staff). Figure 2

Figure 1: Summary of 'Farming with Nature Scheme'



<p>Introduction of new</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of new habitats or introduction of new environmental management • Payments for actions (management) + bonus payment for delivery of environmental results (meeting targets) • To include all EFS options and re-introduce measures from the NICMS that were not included in EFS. • Several new options also proposed
<p>Improvement of existing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of existing habitats, heritage or environmental management practices • Enhancement of traditional farm buildings / gates and gate posts • Payment when targets are met (results) • <i>If targets are already met, then the 'results bonus' should be paid from year 1?</i>
<p>Maintaining existing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirement to carry out as part of the application to the scheme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Farm Water Management Plan (risk areas identified)</i> • <i>Carbon audit</i> • <i>Commitment to carry out basic soil testing (NPK pH)</i> • <i>Baseline habitat mapping and scoring carried out by farmer (to determine area payment and targets)</i> • <i>'Tidy' farm</i> • Area payment for all land entered into the voluntary agreement (not necessarily whole farm). • Payment for maintaining existing habitats / environmental practices – farmers will score these habitats etc. • Each environmental land type or management practice will have different values depending on environmental 'value'. • Targets set for improvement – optional to deliver but there is an incentive to achieve the bonus payment. • Will include 'man-made heritage' e.g. raths, standing stones.

Figure 2: Application and claim process



How will farmers assess habitats?

The UFU believes that given the right tools, NI farmers are capable of assessing and scoring the habitats they have on farm for payment. Environmental consultants should not be necessary and as much assistance as possible should be provided to allow the farmer to use his/her own skills and knowledge to deliver this scheme. This scheme should not become a profit centre for consultants and eNGOs.

Empowering farmers and providing them with the skills and any further help required will deliver greater environmental and on-farm benefits as the farmer takes ownership of his/her actions. The following will be required to assist with this process:

- i. Guidance/Information Packs: Guidance clearly setting out the requirements of the scheme. This should be provided in advance of the application period. For each habitat type / environmental management system the various indicator points on a scale should be clearly identified and set out to allow farmers to assess their farm.
- ii. Online tools: Videos and images will be key to explaining the scheme and scoring process.
- iii. Farmer trainers / advisers: Farmers across NI should be invited to become trainers/advisers for this scheme. These individuals should be responsible for delivering training events and providing assistance with the scheme as and when necessary. This peer support mechanism we believe will result in significant benefits.
- iv. DAERA advisers: Local advisers with the necessary experience should be available to assist farmers with habitat assessments, scoring and deliver. NIEA should not be involved at farm level.

- v. Discussion Groups: Facilitated by DAERA advisers and farmer advisers. New groups could be created or built into the existing BDGs.
- vi. Smart Phone applications: Applications should be promoted / developed to assist farmers with assessing and scoring habitats.
- vii. LIDAR mapping: LIDAR screening of Northern Ireland will give some baseline information in terms of location and quality of existing habitats.
- viii. Maps and satellite images:

Quality assurance and penalties

The UFU accepts that checks will be required to ensure public funds are not at risk. Remote sensing, satellite images, drone footage and inspectors on the ground can all be used to monitor compliance.

Penalties should be generally avoided particularly if the non-compliance can be rectified and only imposed when a farmer refuses to comply, has caused pollution/damage or has knowingly submitted a fraudulent claim.

The tolerances for over and under claiming must be re-considered. Currently, a small discrepancy can result in significant penalties being applied to payments and is one of the main issues raised by farmers. The focus should be on delivering environmental outcomes and the monitoring regime should be flexible to allow for this.

Force majeure / exceptional circumstances will be required.

Measuring scheme outcomes

It is important that Northern Ireland agriculture and DAERA can show the benefits of any agri-environment scheme. NI targets should be set and baseline data gathered before the scheme opens with regular monitoring throughout the scheme period. Farmers could also be involved by providing information from their farm if necessary i.e. 'citizen's science'.

Conacre

While the UFU accepts that it is difficult to allow for the inclusion of conacre land in an agri-environment contract, the UFU believes that there may be some circumstances where this can be permitted. For example vegetable and potato farmers have indicated that they are often excluded from agri-environment schemes due to their requirement to rotate land on an annual basis. If they were permitted to allocate some of the annual options in the bottom tier of the proposed scheme e.g. annual wild bird cover to conacre land as long as the total area submitted remained the same, it would allow the scheme to be more attractive to these farmers. Leased land should be permitted to be included as is currently the case.

Linking with other complementary support schemes

Delivery of some of the proposed measures may be assisted through capital grants provided through alternative schemes e.g. machinery to allow farmers to adopt precision and improved environmental management.

Other points

Land eligibility definitions must be removed as these are detrimental to agri-environmental work and result in confusion and conflict. For example, the strict rules around width of hedges, height of heather and the presence of scrub and rushes have all been detrimental to the farmed environment.

The scheme must be flexible to allow it to adapt to emerging science, environmental conditions and farming circumstances. Flexibility must also be built into any supporting IT systems to allow the scheme to be easily amended if necessary and in a timely manner.