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NRN NEWS

connecting communities, growing our future

SPOTLIGHT

Blátnaid Gallagher, founder of the Galway Wool Co-op, the first virtual co-op of its kind in Ireland. See case study on page 6



LEADER Programme Update

Activity in the LEADER programme has continued to increase. As of the end of March 2022, there were 5,143 LEADER projects approved with a total value of over €215m.

Since the Transitional LEADER programme came into effect on the 1st of April 2021, bridging the gap to the next LEADER programme in 2023, 767 projects have been approved for funding, worth a combined €36.5m. Moreover, some 151 projects are working their way through the approval process, which has an added value of over €9m.

LEADER has continued to progress due to the resilience of the different actors involved in delivering the programme. To learn more about LEADER funding, see: www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader

Ireland's Draft 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan Information Sessions

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine held a series of public information sessions in March relating to Ireland's Draft 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan, which was submitted to the European Commission on the 31st December 2021.

At the 11 sessions hosted in venues across the country, staff from the Department provided important information to farmers about the changes that will occur when the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) commences in 2023.

The sessions covered topics such as direct payments (including entitlements), active farmer checks, agricultural activity and land eligibility changes, stocking rates, Eco-Schemes, details on the new Agri-Environmental Climate Measure (AECM), organic farming and other information to help farmers prepare for 2023.

In particular, the information sessions will cover direct payments including entitlements, active farmer checks, agricultural activity and land eligibility changes, stocking rates, Eco-Schemes, details on the new Agri-Environmental Climate Measure (AECM), organic farming and other important information that farmers need to know now so they can best prepare for 2023.

As webinar was also recorded for those who could not attend the events. It can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/QdK0M0kwTfM>

A PDF version of Ireland's Draft 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan, as well as the presentations from the information sessions, are available at: <http://www.gov.ie/cap/>

LEADER Programme: International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland Cooperation Project

Launched in 2013, the International Appalachian Trail (IAT) Ulster Ireland is a 449-kilometre coast-to-coast cross-border walking trail. Beginning at Slieve League in Co. Donegal, the IAT traverses four counties and finishes at the port of Larne in Co. Antrim. Along the route, walkers can experience breath-taking scenery, historic landmarks, diverse culture and heritage sites.

The Ulster Ireland chapter of the IAT is one of an expanding number of chapters which comprise the IAT family worldwide and which include among others Maine in the US, Quebec in Canada, Iceland, England, Scotland, Wales, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France, Spain and Morocco. All chapters share a common mission which is to establish a network of walking trails that extend beyond borders to all geographic regions. In addition to connecting people and places, the goal is to promote natural and cultural heritage, health and fitness, environmental stewardship, fellowship and understanding, cross-border cooperation, and rural economic development through eco and geo-tourism.

In 2016, led by Donegal Local Development CLG in the Republic of Ireland and Derry and Strabane Rural Partnership in Northern Ireland, six Local Action Groups (LAGs) which also included Causeway Coast and Glens LAG, Fermanagh and Omagh LAG, Mid-Ulster Rural Development Partnership, and Mid and East Antrim LAG, came together to determine whether there would be sufficient interest in taking the IAT forward as a cooperation project and to assess its potential economic and community benefit to each of the areas involved. Based on the findings of an Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI) scoping study, a decision was taken to proceed. LEADER funding was sought to develop and improve the physical infrastructure along the IAT with a significant investment directed towards marketing the route.

According to Inga Bock, Rural Recreation Officer, Donegal



The International Appalachian Trail Ulster Ireland is framed within stunning landscape

Local Development CLG, "Funding new trails under LEADER is quite challenging, as most trails will need to access private land. Early and ongoing engagement with landowners is vital to ensure permission and goodwill are achieved throughout the lifetime of a trail project. We are very grateful to be working with so many proactive landowners on the IAT."

Results

Funding received under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (extended to 2022) has had a transformational impact. The establishment of this cooperation between the six partner LAGs involved has resulted in the development of an international standard high quality walking experience connecting four counties and six district council areas north and south of the border. Physical enhancements made to the IAT Ulster Ireland supported by LEADER funding such as new way marking, trail re-routing, additional trail infrastructure and furniture, branded signage, art and sculptures, path developments and amenity improvements along the route have not only served to improve walker safety and navigation on the trail but have also helped to showcase the region's culture, history and heritage.

You can read the full LEADER case study on the NRN website: www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/leader/

Young Farmer from Co. Laois making Soil Health a Priority

The National Rural Network (NRN) recently met with young farmer Tomas Moore from Abbeyleix, County Laois. Tomas farms a mix of dry stock breeds such as the rare breed Dexter, and a mix of Hereford, Angus, and Friesian cross cattle alongside the tillage enterprise. Completing his green cert in June 2021, Tomas began the process of becoming an Organic farmer by applying to the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS) this year (2022).

The health of soil affects its ability to maintain a supply of available nutrients for crop uptake...

"I have visited several similar farms that are farming organically, I love the idea of farming and making a living out of what the land can sustain itself. Ireland has targets to meet around organics, there is an incentive with the OFS scheme that will make the transition easier. I believe the measures I have incorporated will ensure my farm is viable and sustainable into the future".

Tomas was successful in his application to the pilot Soil Sampling Programme initiative in 2021 which provided a comprehensive oversight of the soil health and condition on his farm. This information is vital for knowing the health status of the soil which is an important driver to ensuring the success of the transition to organic.

He is farming forty acres, of which five acres are in organic

oats, and the remaining 35 acres is in grassland, five acres of which are in a multi-species sward. The aim is to build an organic system that is sustainable and low-cost. Tomas intends to use home-grown organic oats to feed cattle during the winter months. Once the oats are harvested, a catch crop is sown. During the main grazing season, all livestock are rotated between the grass clover swards and multi-species swards (MSS). During the late autumn/winter period livestock are fed silage and striped grazed on the catch crop to minimise concentrate feed usage. All slurry produced on the farm is applied to the silage ground using Low Emission Slurry Spreading equipment, to ensure the most efficient uptake of nutrients.

Purchased feed and fertilisers are expensive inputs on conventional farms, converting to Organic farming, means no chemical inputs are used and alternative measures to enhance soil health are essential such as:

- Clover in swards, to avail of its nitrogen fixation ability;
- MSS, includes a variety of forage grasses, herbs and legumes in the animal's diet, this helps prevent sickness and poor thriving.

The diversity of species within the MSS sward contributes to nitrogen-fixing, sequestering carbon deeper into the soil due to deeper rooting structures and they perform well in drought conditions.



Tomas with his herd of Dexter's in a grass clover sward.

"The health of soil affects its ability to maintain a supply of available nutrients for crop uptake. Knowing where I stand from a soil health and fertility perspective, I can be confident that my farm will grow more than enough grass to meet the demands of the livestock. I can't rely on chemical inputs to do the job so it's essential the clovers and other herbs and legumes provide for the bugs in the soil."

The Results Based Environment Agri Pilot Programme (REAP)



Ivan, who farms in partnership with his father Herbert, farms 150 acres all grassland, sustaining up to seventy suckler cows and their progeny (calves)

Ivan Austin is a suckler farmer from Coolrain near the Slieve Bloom Mountains and is participating in the Results Based Environment Agri Pilot Programme (REAP). The REAP is a voluntary results based agri-environment pilot project that pays farmers to maintain and improve the environmental conditions of their lands.

Launched in 2021, it is a two-year project where farmers work with their advisors to undertake environmental improvement works on the land to increase their environmental score in year two. REAP encourages farmers to enhance the environmental quality of existing features and habitats rather than to create new ones. This differs from previous agri-environmental schemes such as the Green Low-carbon Agri-environmental Scheme (GLAS) which provided a suite of measures or actions to be maintained or carried out.

"Farmers need to be cognisant of the fact that in recent years farming has been driven by production, but REAP opens your eyes to the diversity of flora and fauna present on farms, having a value placed on it will encourage farmers to preserve it".

Ivan, who farms in partnership with his father Herbert, farms 150 acres all grassland, sustaining up to seventy suckler cows and their calves. Ivan is an active participant in the Beef Data Genomics Programme (BDGP) and keeps a mixture of breeds such as Angus, Blonde d'Aquitaine and Simmentals, all who maintain high genetic merit.

Ivan farms with the environment in mind and believes that programmes such as the BDGP and REAP add to a farm's sustainability from both climate change and biodiversity perspectives.

"We were successful with our REAP application last year. Subsequently, our agricultural advisor, Andy walked the land to determine using a low input grassland (LIG) score card the baseline score of the fields included in the application. It amazed me the diverse number of grasses, herbs, legumes and flower species present in our low input grassland fields (LIG)".

Ivan and Herbert put forward six LIG fields to be included in their REAP application, totalling 5.85 Ha. Andy, the Agricultural Advisor used Scorecard A: Low input grassland scorecard, to complete the baseline survey. A variety of positive indicator species were found across each field, some in a higher abundance than others.

Positive Indicator Species such as Sorrel, Bird's foot trefoil, Vetches, Primrose, Meadow sweet, Woodrush and Meadow thistle to name a few were identified. Of the six LIGs fields,

REAP opens your eyes to the diversity of flora and fauna present on farms...

two received a score of 5, one received a score of 6 and three received a score of 9. The highest score that could be achieved is 10. The combination of positive and negative indicator species and the percentage distribution of each along with an assessment of each field boundary contributed to the field score awarded.

Hedgerows and Field Margins were assessed based on current conditions. Nine hedgerows/treelines were assessed within Ivan's application, of which eight received a Condition A and one received a Condition C.

Hedgerows/treelines:



Ivan and Herbert will receive an annual payment of €1,200 for their participation in the scheme. Additional payments will be received to complement the baseline scores received, should the score increase in Year 2 (May-August 2022) a higher payment will be awarded to reflect the improvement. LIG Field Scores have assigned Payment rates per Ha:

Field Score	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	<4 (3,2,1)
€ rate per Ha	€400	€375	€350	€325	€300	€275	€250	0

Ivan and Herbert received a total additional payment of €1,935.06 based on the Field Scores awarded and the total area within each LIG. Year one, receiving a total REAP payment of €3,135. An increase to 2022 or Year 2 REAP payment will depend on an increase in the baseline score for each field and the completion of complementary actions.

Andy provided a list of recommendations to enhance the score in year 2 to a higher score than achieved in the baseline score (year 1), these include:

Fencing off and increasing field margins, reducing fertiliser inputs, reducing grazing pressure, controlling the spread of encroaching scrub and considering late cut meadow for an additional bonus payment.

Complementary Actions allowable under the REAP included

(a) tree planting (€9.20/ tree); and

(b) New hedgerow planting/ hedgerow gapping up (€15.80 per metre).

Andy the Agricultural Consultant suggested that up to 80 metres of 'New hedgerow planting/ hedgerow gapping' is completed within the LIG fields, this has the potential to award the maximum additional payment for completion of complementary actions of €1,200 to the year 2 payment.

"As a result of our participation in REAP, we fenced off and increased field margins, reduced our chemical fertiliser inputs in line with suggested levels, reduced grazing intensity on the recommended LIGs, and planted a new hedgerow within the LIG field margins. When this matures it will act as an extra buffer zone for the stream, provide shelter and shade for animals, protect the soil and benefit wildlife and pollinators".



Ivan and Herbert put forward six input grassland fields in their REAP application

The Galway Wool Co-op – An Inspiring Roadmap for the Native Irish Wool Industry



Blátnaid Gallagher is the founder of the Galway Wool Co-op

Wool is a sustainable, organic, renewable natural material which can be used in a wide range of products such as textiles, fertilisers, insulation and packaging. Whilst wool production was an important component of the agricultural industry in Ireland in the 1970s and 80s, today Irish farmers breed sheep mainly for meat, resulting in wool being considered a secondary product. This shift in focus within the sheep sector has resulted in high-quality native Irish wool, such as that of the Galway Sheep breed's, seeping into the national wool clip, and subsequently haemorrhaging out to Asian Wool Markets classified as waste, resulting in a high-value, carbon-friendly product becoming a low-value one, with the price of wool having plummeted to as low as 20 cents per kg in recent years.

Recent MSc in AgInnovation Graduate from NUI Galway, Blátnaid Gallagher who farms near the historical Village of Aughrim in east Co. Galway, founded the Galway Wool Co-op with other members of the Galway Sheep Breeders Society in January 2021 to reverse the decline of the purebred Galway population, Ireland's only native sheep breed, by setting up niche market opportunities domestically and internationally for Galway wool. With the help of Galway Rural Development, funding under Ireland's LEADER Programme 2014-2020 (extended to 2022) played a key role in supporting this locally-led initiative to establish an e-commerce marketplace and trading platform in the form of a dedicated Galway Wool Co-op website as well as a range of promotional material including a video.

Following several Zoom meetings and WhatsApp conversations between this farmer-owned and run co-operative, now comprising 70 pedigree registered Galway Sheep flocks throughout Ireland, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, their hard work and determination to create a separate and direct supply chain for Galway wool to yarn makers finally paid off in June 2021 with the sale of its first batch of native Irish Galway wool to Donegal Yarn, a spinning mill in Kilcar, Co. Donegal, who sell directly to weavers and knitters in Ireland and all over the world. Donegal Yarn offered the Co-op a fair and equitable price of between €2 to €2.50 per kg for the Galway breed's wool, as opposed to the average market price of just 20 cents per kg. As part of this transaction 5,400kg of clean rolled, premium Galway fleece was collected, weighed, and prepared for supply to Donegal Yarn by Co-op members during a special 'Wool Meitheal' event held in Athenry Mart, Co. Galway, marking a historic day for Irish wool sales, with the group achieving almost 12 times above the going rate for their premium produce.

Using its website as its headquarters, the innovative and inspiring Galway Wool Co-op is the first virtual Co-op of its kind in Ireland. The long-term goal of the Co-op is to continue to promote the cultural integrity of sustainable and traceable Galway wool, and to ensure it becomes a premier quality bio-fibre sought after by international designers and creators of home interiors and slow fashion garments. More information of the Galway Wool Co-op can be found at www.galwaywool.ie

European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Rural Revitalisation

The National Rural Network (NRN) is currently participating in a new European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Thematic Group (TG) on Rural Revitalisation launched in response to the need for a 'one-stop-shop' platform for rural communities, project holders and authorities to collaborate in, outlined in the European Commission's Long-term Vision for Rural Areas. Central to this vision is the ambition to revitalise Europe's rural areas, and mitigate the impact of negative trends, so that by 2040 they are stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous. The first meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on Rural Revitalisation, attended by 52 participants from 21 EU Member States, including MAs, NRNs, European organisations, the European Commission, LAGs, national/regional stakeholder organisations and research, provided a space for exchange on the key enabling factors that support rural revitalisation, with particular attention to those rural areas affected

by population loss, ageing and a lack of economic opportunities at regional and local level. Lessons learned from existing initiatives driving the revitalisation of rural areas such as the Small Places Matter Pilot Action and the Smart Rural 21 Pilot Project were also shared. Participants provided feedback on recommendations featured within a working document developed by the TG on the key elements and features required to help shape a strategic Rural Revitalisation Platform (RRP) which will support rural communities to plan for and implement actions on the ground during the second TG meeting. The potential contribution of the Thematic Group and its members to the Rural Pact Conference held from the 15th to 16th of June 2022 was also discussed. More information of this TG can be found at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-thematic-work/long-term-rural-vision/TG-rural-revitalisation_en_en

European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) LEADER Thematic Group (TG)

Since its inception in 1991, the LEADER Programme has been the mainstay of rural community development here in Ireland and across the EU, providing local actors with the necessary resources and support to enable them to actively engage and direct the local development of their area in an innovative, integrated and inclusive manner. Whilst EU Member States continue with the implementation of LEADER under the 2014-2020 (extended to 2022) programming period rules, they are simultaneously finalising their CAP Strategic Plans, and starting to design national implementing rules, procedures, and guidance for the selection of LAGs

and the selection and implementation of local development strategies. As part of this process, the National Rural Network is currently participating in a new European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) LEADER Thematic Group (TG) aimed at ensuring that the seven LEADER principles are fully adopted and delivered in local development by every Local Action Group (LAG) in each EU Member State under their respective CAP Strategic Plans. The seven LEADER principles cover public-private partnership, a territorial approach based on sub-regional areas, integrated local development strategy, bottom-up management, cooperation, networking and innovation in the local context. The first TG meeting, held on the 10th of March 2022 via Zoom, facilitated discussions and exchanges between LEADER experts from across the EU on a range of agenda items including the questions of what qualifies as 'non-implementation' of the seven LEADER principles, and what are the key factors affecting (both 'blocking' and conducive to) the application of the seven LEADER principles in practice? The 2nd TG meeting took place on the 24th of May 2022. More information on this LEADER TG can be found here: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/making-seven-leader-principles-work-practice-all-lags-under-cap-strategic-plans_en



International Recognition for the MacGillicuddy Reeks EIP-AGRI Project

One of the huge success stories of the innovative, locally-led, farmer-centred EIP-AGRI initiative here in Ireland, co-funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the EU Commission under the Rural Development Programme (RDP), is the MacGillicuddy Reeks EIP Project being named Runner-Up of the prestigious International 2020-2021 UIAA Mountain Protection Award (MPA). The UIAA Mountain Protection Award recognises sustainability-focused projects supported by UIAA member associations which engage mountaineers and climbers directly in their initiatives. This EIP-AGRI Project is diligently working to improve the environmental sustainability and economic viability of farming in the MacGillicuddy Reeks, a unique upland landscape that encompasses over eight thousand hectares of Natura designated, privately owned HNV farmland, through the development of practical, achievable actions and innovative solutions with landowners/farmers to alleviate rising pressures brought about by the largely uncontrolled and unmonitored recreational use by over 125,000 people visiting the Reeks annually. The MacGillicuddy Reeks EIP Project overcame stiff competition from some of the most well known mountain ranges around the world including The Alpine Club of Canada, The Alps Mountaineering Villages, The Himalayan Togetherness for the Sustainability of the Mountain Trails, the United Kingdom H2O Community Hub Scheme and The South American Clean Mountain Project. Speaking after receiving this global award, Patricia Deane, Project Manager of the MacGillicuddy Reeks EIP project highlights that "...all involved - the Operational Group, Reeks Forum, our farmers, local collective groups and communities are undeniably thrilled and extremely proud of this achievement. It is great to have recognition of all the hard work and effort carried out over the past years by all involved and demonstrates what locally led bottom-up approaches can achieve...". More information on the MacGillicuddy Reeks EIP Project can be found at www.macgillicuddyreekskerry.com

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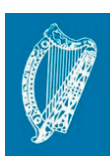
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The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
Europe investing in rural areas

