



Results-based scheme under the spotlight

The Results-Based Agri-Environment Pilot Scheme (RBAPS) may become a model for future schemes

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The north Leitrim landscape consists of rolling hills overlain with a network of hedgerows and small fields which are home to low-intensity cattle and sheep enterprises. Much of it is high nature value (HNV) farmland. Afforestation, emigration and land abandonment pose an increasing threat to rural viability and to these species- and habitat-rich semi natural grassland landscapes.

Teagasc advisor Cian Condon says: "Each farmer has to identify the optimum mix of income from the

marketplace and through providing public goods such as biodiversity."

One of Cian's clients, Hubert McTernan, farms in the townland of Conray 8km west of Manorhamilton. "Between owned, leased and commonage land, we farm about 90ha," says Hubert. "It's fragmented (four blocks in Leitrim and one in Sligo) and from the production point of view a lot of it is classed as either marginal or hilly ground."

Stock consists of 270 crossbred ewes, nine suckler cows and their calves, and one bull. In many fields, livestock can only be checked on foot and most machinery operations are impossible. Hubert's off-farm employment takes up 50 to 60 hours per week and he says that his retired father (Paddy) is an

expert stockman and plays an invaluable role on the farm.

The McTernans have been involved in environmental schemes for many years including REPS, AEOS and currently the Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environmental Scheme (GLAS). Their GLAS application consists of five actions: 10ha of low-input permanent pasture, 12ha of commonage, 15 bird boxes, 15 bat boxes and the protection of an archaeological monument.

The GLAS scheme requirements are relatively easy to implement and are generating the maximum payment of €5,000 per year. Their GLAS advisor Aoife King (FRS) suggested to them that they may be suitable for a new initiative, the Results-Based Agri-Environment Pilot Scheme (RBAPS).



higher scores and thus increase his payment per hectare.

“Our score for this piece of land is ‘7’ earning a payment of €230/ha,” says Hubert. “An increase of one unit on the scale would raise his payment by approximately €50/ha. “Controlling rushes through topping would increase the cover of positive indicator species and in turn increase our score. But topping is difficult on this site due to the steep slopes so a more targeted grazing approach with higher sheep numbers or a few horses may be the solution.”

To date, it is slightly undergrazed with a stocking rate of 3.5 ewes per hectare for a collective period of nine months. Hubert says: “We know what’s wanted and it is up to us to deliver the output.” Unfortunately, as RBAPS is a pilot scheme with only two years’ payment, it is hard to justify the farmer making too many radical changes to management within this timeframe.

However, if the wider scheme is continued over a longer period, this issue would be solved and there would be a greater capacity to increase income on farms and offer positive benefits to the local environment. “Any scheme which draws on local farmers’ knowledge as well as science has to be a good thing,” concludes Hubert.

Above: Eyebright and sedges are part of the valuable biodiversity encouraged by the scheme.

Far left: Hubert McTernan, Cian Condon and Paddy McTernan.

“When I became aware of RBAPS through Teagasc, I could immediately see the potential on this farm for the two schemes complement each other,” says Aoife.

RBAPS is a three-year EU-funded project running until June 2018 in Co Leitrim, the Shannon Callows and the Navarra region in Spain. It is an example of a locally led scheme (where farmers play a role in suggesting actions which they believe will benefit the environment and are paid based on the degree to which these actions succeed in delivering desirable outcomes such as greater species diversity).

In the Shannon Callows, the options available to farmers include managing species-rich flood meadows (with rare plant communities) or wet grassland suitable for breeding waders (important bird populations of curlew, lapwing, redshank and snipe). In Spain, the focus is on maintaining the biodiversity associated with traditional perennial crops such as vineyards, olives and almond groves.

RBAPS is similar to the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects that are currently being promoted by DAFM and can be regarded as ground-up rather than centrally-led schemes. It explores how the Burren model of paying farmers for the qual-

ity of biodiversity achieved on their grasslands can be expanded to other areas.

“We are paid at different levels depending on how important the land is for nature and wildlife, and how well we manage it,” says Hubert. In Co Leitrim, 13 farmers are enrolled on the pilot scheme, with the focus on developing and testing biodiversity health checks for species-rich grasslands and areas that can provide habitat for species such as the rare Marsh Fritillary Butterfly.

Dolores Byrne, an RBAPS researcher based at IT Sligo, has given the participants training to enable them to understand the ideas behind the scheme and to assist them in achieving the best results. Dolores points out that “farmers in RBAPS are free to make management decisions to suit their circumstances, and payment is made only on the quality of product they provide.”

“We have a sheep grazed plot of 6ha in the species-rich measure for 2016 and 2017,” says Hubert. “This land has a number of positive indicator plants such as Eyebrights and Sedges, which are evidence of the generally good biodiversity condition of the land.”

Hubert has been advised on how to improve biodiversity and achieve

RBAPS scoring system

The payment rates are based on a scoring system of one (poor quality with zero payment) to 10 (highest quality with payment of €350/ha). The criteria that influence this score include:

- The number and cover of positive indicator plant species such as Orchids and Tormentil.
- The number and cover of negative species such as noxious weeds and perennial ryegrass, vegetation structure, level of litter present, level of encroaching scrub, cover of bracken and a range of other damaging activities.

The assessment in the pilot scheme is undertaken by RBPAS staff, but in the future where a similar scheme is rolled out, it is envisaged that it would be carried out by trained agricultural advisors or the farmers themselves.