



**Farmer engagement with agri-environment
schemes in a commonage setting in Co. Mayo**

Report for Participants

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Note: this report has been prepared to provide feedback to study participants

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Acronyms Used

CAP – Common Agricultural Policy

CMP – Commonage Management Plan

DAFM – Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

LDC – Local Development Company

EIP – European Innovation Partnership

OIGS – Old Irish Goat Society

NPWS – National Parks and Wildlife Service

REPS – Rural Environment Protection Scheme

Introduction

This document summarises research carried out in a commonage sheep farming area of County Mayo between January and August of 2017. The research seeks to better understand commonage farmer perceptions and engagement with agri-environment schemes. I therefore chose the southern slopes of the Owenduff/Nepin Beg Special Area of Conservation as a case-study (Figure 1). This locality has a high proportion of unfenced upland commonage, High Nature Value farmland (Sullivan et al., 2017), high levels of policy intervention, strong environmental protection, and issues with farm viability. 47 individuals were

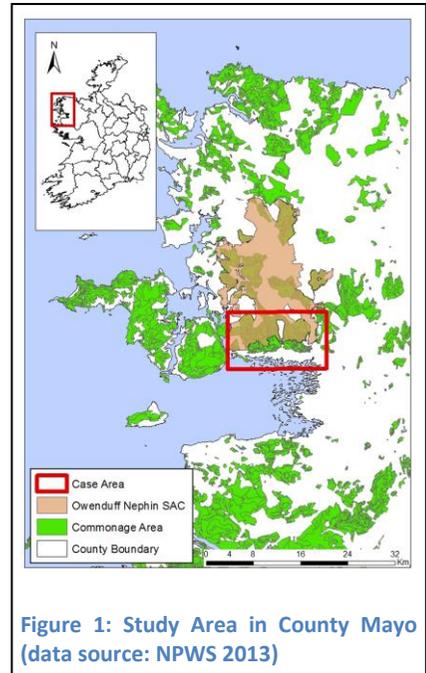


Figure 1: Study Area in County Mayo (data source: NPWS 2013)

interviewed in relation to their experience of the Green Low-carbon Agri-environment Scheme (GLAS) and/or the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Initiative. Both GLAS and the EIP are run as part of Ireland's national implementation of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and are therefore co-funded at a European level. Participants included 31 farmers, 7 agri-environmental consultants, and 9 other relevant individuals (Table 1). I specifically sought to speak with those involved in the EIP. Therefore, many of the research participants have a high level understanding of Irish agricultural policy. These individuals appear to have led farmer engagement with the EIP Project Proposal in the case study area. Speaking with these people can help understand how to motivate and guide groups in other areas. While this group advanced to the second round of the EIP process, they were ultimately unsuccessful in gaining funding for their

proposals. There are still important lessons to be learned from their process. Moreover, the work undertaken by this group could provide a strong foundation for future applications to other agri-environmental initiatives.

Commonage refers to areas of collectively owned farmland where sheep farming is the main mode of production (Figure 2). The management of these areas is complicated with multiple owners, ageing demographics, low profitability, difficult terrain, and the need for highly skilled labour and knowledge-intensive farming practices. For these reasons, national policy has struggled to incentivise sustainable management of commonage over the past 25 years. The agri-environment schemes focused on in this report represent new efforts, new challenges and new possibilities in terms of sustainable commonage management.

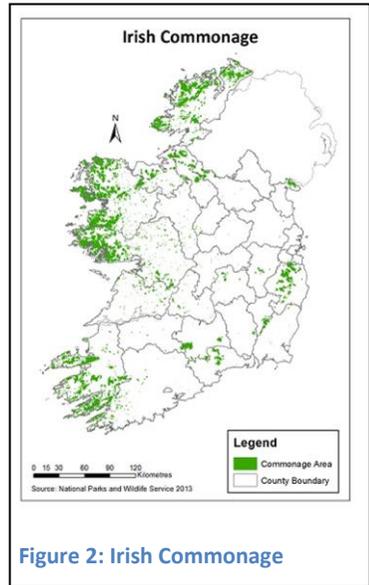


Figure 2: Irish Commonage

Understanding how commonage farmers are engaging with these schemes is important for identifying the successes and shortcomings of such schemes, and thereby improving future schemes. The data generated for this research does not however, provide a basis for evaluating the potential of such scheme to improve commonage condition. There are several key findings relating to each scheme. Although these findings are specific to our case study area, they may resonate with other unfenced upland commonage areas.

| Summary of Interviewees | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Commonage Farmers | 31 |
| Other local | 5 |
| Other non-local | 3 |
| Agri-environmental consultants | 7 |
| Civil Servants | 1 |
| Total | 47 |

Table 1: Summary of Interviewees

GLAS

The Green Low-carbon Agri-environment Scheme (GLAS) is the primary agri-environment scheme currently active in Ireland. GLAS' overarching aim is to encourage environmentally beneficial or benign agricultural practices. GLAS opened for applications in February 2015 and will run until 2020. The scheme is available to all Irish farmers and aims to have 50,000 participants nationally.

GLAS offers farmers a suite of actions from which to choose. Participating farmers are paid different rates per hectare for different actions (see Figure 3). For instance, participating farmers receive €120 per hectare of commonage managed in accordance with GLAS requirements. Farmers with commonage are given priority access to GLAS (Figure 4). Those who enter GLAS and have a share in any commonage over 10 ha in size are required to join a Commonage Management Plan (CMP) with other GLAS participants on that same commonage. These plans must be drawn up via the employment of a registered agri-environmental consultant. The plan details the overall livestock carrying capacity of the commonage, and distributes the grazing allowance between farmers based on ownership shares. A huge amount of detail is available on the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) website in relation to this scheme. GLAS has had some success on



commonage. Indeed, of over 11,000 farms with commonage, as of June 2019 more than 8,800 are participating in the scheme (personal communication). Agri-environmental consultants with whom I spoke emphasised that GLAS works well for the majority of their clients, in terms of providing additional income without requiring drastic changes to their farm management practices. I present some positive responses to GLAS in this regard. However, the intention of this study is to identify the range of concerns and challenges experienced so that the caveats of GLAS may be understood. This report therefore focuses upon more critical responses that could be used to inform future policy design. It is important to bear in mind therefore that the study is not statistically representative of all commonage farmers. The main findings in relation to GLAS are summarised here.

Summary of findings related to GLAS

1. Commonage farmers respond to GLAS based on their individual livelihood strategy, circumstances, and labour capacities.
2. GLAS was seen as an important source of income, requiring only minor adjustments for most commonage farmers;
3. Cash flow issues and uncertainty around scheme requirements were a concern for some farmers;
4. Some farmers were frustrated by policy elements that increased application costs and by poor communication with DAFM over delayed payments;
5. GLAS was a way of managing perceived income risks for some farmers;
6. Accurate local farmer knowledge is needed to create appropriate Commonage Management Plans;
7. GLAS does not fully account for the skills, dogs, breeds, and habits of sheep involved in commonage farming; and,
8. Some farmers are concerned that GLAS implementation will require commonage farmers to police and/or report on each other.

| Action | € per metre/year | € per ha/year | € per unit/year | € per m ³ /year |
|---|------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Arable grass margins | | | | |
| a. 3 metre margin | €0.35 | | | |
| b. 4 metre margin | €0.50 | | | |
| c. 6 metre margin | €0.70 | | | |
| Bat boxes | | | €13 | |
| Bird Boxes | | | €6 | |
| Commonages | | €120 | | |
| Conservation of solitary bees | | | | |
| a. Box | | | €6 | |
| b. Sand | | | €45 | |
| Catch Crops | | €155 | | |
| Coppicing Hedgerows | €2.20 | | | |
| Environmental Management of Fallow Land | | €750 | | |
| Farmland Birds | | | | |

Figure 3. Table of payments for actions under GLAS: Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2015.

| OBJECTIVE: GLAS AIMS TO ADDRESS THE CROSS-CUTTING OBJECTIVES OF CLIMATE CHANGE, WATER QUALITY AND BIODIVERSITY. | |
|---|--|
| CORE | <p>Core Management Requirements All of these requirements are compulsory:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An approved agricultural planner must prepare the GLAS application • Nutrient Management Planning • Training in environmental practices and standards • Record keeping of actions delivered |
| | <p>TIER 1 Priority Environmental Assets and Actions Tier 1(a) All farmers with PEAs get first priority access to the Scheme in Year One and subsequent years. If any of these Priority Assets are applicable to the holding, they must be chosen and the relevant actions planned:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmland Habitat (private Natura sites) • Farmland Birds (Breeding Waders, Chough, Corncrake, Geese/swans, Grey Partridge, Hen Harrier, Twite) • Commonages (50% target participation in GLAS Commonage Plan) • High Status Water Area • Rare Breeds <p>Tier 1(b) If an applicant (whether beef, sheep or dairy) with a whole farm stocking-rate exceeding 140kg Livestock Manure Nitrogen per hectare produced on the holding, or any farmer with more than 30ha of arable crops, wishes to be considered under Tier 1, s/he must adopt at least one of the following four mandatory actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum Tillage (arable farm >30ha) • Catch crops Establishment from a Sown Crop (arable farm >30ha) • Low Emission Slurry Spreading (livestock farm >140kg N/ha only) • Wild Bird Cover (livestock farm > 140kg N/ha only) <p>Registered Organic farmers will qualify for priority access to the scheme under Tier 1(b), by selecting actions appropriate to the farm. However, if any of the assets listed in the first set of bullet-points above apply, they must be chosen first. Commitments under the Organic Farming Scheme will not qualify for payment under GLAS. It is not guaranteed that all eligible applicants in Tier 1(b) will get into the Scheme and a scoring matrix will apply if necessary.</p> |
| PRIORITY | <p>TIER 2 Environmental Assets and Actions Tier 2(a) Farmers, who do not have Priority Environmental Assets but whose lands include a Vulnerable Water Area, may apply for access to the scheme under Tier 2. In such cases, the appropriate actions relevant to Vulnerable Water Areas must</p> |

Figure 4. Table of core requirements and priorities under GLAS. Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2015

Positive commentary on GLAS

It is important to note the positive aspects of GLAS. In particular, agri-environmental consultants emphasised to me that for most commonage farmers GLAS works well, particularly if they have the 42 ha of commonage required for the €5000 payment. Many commonage farmers also had good things to say about GLAS. The average Irish sheep farmer is heavily dependent on scheme payments (Dillon, Moran, & Donnellan, 2017). As such, there was praise expressed for the important financial support that GLAS provides to commonage farmers, not just as profit, but also as a means of improving their farm management. As one farmer told me, “you have to sell a lot of sheep to make €5000 a year”. Moreover, many farmers highlighted that the market for lamb varies from year to year. In this context, and without considering delayed payments, GLAS provides relatively secure income.

In addition to the income support, many of the commonage farmers with whom I spoke did not have to implement dramatic changes in order to comply with the scheme requirements. This point is also supported by the experiences of agri-environmental consultants. They emphasised to me that many of the farmers who have maintained their required stocking levels qualified for the scheme by default. As such, those farmers simply had to fill out the requisite forms and maintain their current level of stocking. Finally, while the accounts that I present in the next sections include some criticisms of the GLAS scheme, agri-environmental consultants advised me that there is often a negative reaction to new schemes because people are not sure how they work. For example, they saw negative reactions to REPS and, more recently, the Sheep Welfare Scheme. Negative perceptions can deter farmers from participating in schemes, meaning that they miss out on income and other benefits. Moreover, in spite of some of the critiques, almost all the farmers with whom I spoke (28 out of 31) were participating in GLAS.

Cost of Application, Cash Flow, and Communication

Of the 31 commonage farmers I interviewed, 28 were in GLAS and 14 had some concerns about the scheme. These concerns centred on three main issues. First, there were cash flow problems relating to the GLAS application. Second, some farmers were frustrated with poor communication by the DAFM relating to delayed scheme payments. Third, 14 interviewed farmers had to employ multiple agri-environmental consultants because of policy design. These issues will be discussed in sequence.

Any farmer, with commonage or without, who wants to participate in GLAS must pay for a registered agri-environmental consultant to prepare an application. If a farmer is a client of Teagasc, for example, the initial GLAS application costs between €435-€440 (Teagasc, 2017). A Nutrient Management Plan one year into the programme then costs €465. In addition to these costs, commonage farmers pay for the preparation of a Commonage Management Plan (CMP). For a CMP Teagasc charges between €70-€468 depending on the hectarage of commonage. As such, a Teagasc client seeking to enter GLAS through the commonage management action would pay between €970 and €1373, and receive payments worth up to €25000 over 5 years, or up to €35000 if a farmer qualifies for GLAS+. As of June 2019 3,000 farmers were participating in GLAS+ nationally (personal communication).

Most farmers with whom I spoke did not object to paying a fee in principle and were glad for the work carried out by Teagasc and other agri-environmental consultants. Even still, some farmers stated that they had difficulty paying the sum up front. One agri-environmental consultant I interviewed told me that in his experience this cost did deter some farmers from participating, particularly if they were not eligible for the maximum GLAS payment of €5000 per annum. On this point, two agri-environmental consultants with whom I spoke highlighted the importance of sitting down with farmers to go through the costs and benefits of the scheme. When those farmers saw the potential return compared to the initial outlay most joined

the scheme. As of 2019, participating farmers received an average payment of €4,773. However, the standard deviation and geographic spread of payments were not readily available.

Cash flow problems were potentially exacerbated by significant delays to many farmers' GLAS payments. 11 of the farmers I interviewed had experienced payments delay on one scheme or another. One such farmer explained that a four month delay to one of his payments meant that he was late paying for land he was renting. He said that he might have to sell something to keep the cash flowing. Mostly he emphasised the stress that was caused by the uncertainty. This same farmer explained that you are not always informed when a payment is delayed. Indeed, some farmers were more frustrated with the poor communication *about* delayed payments than they were with delayed payments themselves. This information is important so that adjustments can be made to account for the delay. A number of farmers stated that clear communication would improve good will toward the DAFM. This is not to say that the DAFM does not try to communicate. It does suggest that important information is not getting to all farmers in a way that is easy to access or timely. Agri-environmental consultants were also regarded as a crucial source of information.

A final challenge with GLAS application costs relates to how agri-environmental consultants were assigned to carry out Commonage Management Plans (CMP) on different commonages. Detail on this process are available from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (see 2015b). For some farmers, this has resulted in a situation whereby they have two or more different agri-environmental consultants assigned to different commonages in which they own a share. In practice this means that the farmer had to pay one consultant for the CMP on one commonage, and another consultant for the CMP on the other commonage, thus multiplying the costs. All farmers who had this experience blamed the policy design.

Uncertainty, sheep numbers and shared responsibility

Some farmers were concerned about uncertainty in relation to shared responsibility and stocking requirements in GLAS. Just four farmers were worried that GLAS would restrict their maximum sheep numbers. These were all larger full-time farmers. Others were keen to stay close to their minimum level. The important point here is that if a farmer is required to increase sheep numbers as part of GLAS, it typically costs that farmer money. At the time of interviewing farmers were not sure of their final stocking numbers because the third and final tranche of GLAS applications had just ended. This meant that agri-environmental consultants had not yet been able to draw up final CMPs. The agri-environmental consultants with whom I spoke could nonetheless make accurate predictions, with few farmers having to increase or decrease their stocking levels dramatically. Indeed, most farmers were not particularly concerned about this matter.

Farmers were more anxious about shared responsibility in GLAS. Mainly, there was concern about farmers who were using the commonage but had decided not to enter GLAS. Such farmers are entitled to use the commonage. Some farmers were worried that the CMP would not be able to account for these non-GLAS stocking numbers, even though GLAS includes a mechanism to address this issue (Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, 2015a). Some farmers were afraid that even if they kept to their stock requirements, their efforts could then be undermined by farmers not participating in the scheme. Participating farmers were thus concerned about potential overgrazing and financial penalties at some point in the future. Many farmers told me the DAFM had stated verbally that this would not happen, but confidence was low among those with whom I spoke. Building on this discussion, one agri-environmental consultant explained to me that even with all the data, a consultant still doesn't know where each farmer's sheep are being kept. A farmer could have multiple holdings but the records only show total livestock. For this reason, local knowledge is key to the

development of CMPs. But even then, a consultant relies on everyone telling the truth. Ideally for the scheme to work as designed, total willing participation would need to be fostered with local knowledge input.

These collective responsibility issues also prompted concern that farmers might be required to police each other. Agri-environmental consultants have argued the contrary, and are quite clear on the point that collective agreements should provide more certainty, not less, compared to the previous arrangement in relation to attributing fault (O'Brien & Monaghan, 2012). If there is a breach of basic farmland condition requirements, GLAS' terms and conditions state that the group can be penalised unless fault can be attributed to an individual (Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine, 2015c). In light of the uncertainties detailed already, some farmers felt that the DAFM were deferring responsibility to farmers so that they would compel each other to follow the rules. This criticism seems to flow from one main factor: roughly one third of farmers interviewed stated that they rely on their neighbours for help at several points throughout the year. One farmer explained that if you tell people what to do you will damage your relationships. This means that no one will help you when the time comes. There were thus concerns about how GLAS might affect the working relationships between farmers. Those who discussed this topic with me felt that it would be more appropriate to have an outside enforcer of policy requirements. However, the second half of this report indicates that with appropriate supports and processes, local groups can collaborate to come up with self-organised institutions and agreed management plans.

In spite of these concerns, there are high GLAS participation rates among commonage farmers. Of course important income is at stake, but one farmer gave another possible reason for strong uptake of the scheme. Even though he was critical of the lack of details available about his GLAS requirements, he felt it was less risky to be in GLAS than not in GLAS. By participating in GLAS, he felt he was showing the DAFM that he is willing to engage on the DAFM's

terms. He thought that the DAFM might therefore take a supportive approach if the required grazing levels are not fully achieved in the given period.

Legacy Issues

So far, we have discussed GLAS without appreciating long term processes, previous schemes, or particular commonage farming practices. The relevance of previous schemes was highlighted on several occasions. Interviewees referred to policies that sought to reduce stocking levels on commonage in late 1990s and early 2000s. The effects were felt strongly in the case-study area. Most farmers stated that these policy interventions did improve commonage condition. As one farmer said, “it was severe, but it worked well”. Another praised the compensation payment, which he used for additional feed for his livestock. However, some farmers recalled that as flocks reduced in size it became easier for many farmers to manage these flocks on individually owned land. As such, while farmers were still permitted to graze their flocks on the commonages, I was told that some simply chose not to. Farmers with whom I spoke thus argued that this development may have further reduced the commonage stocking levels. Some of these farmers have since retired, but others are returning to commonage-use. Some interviewees thought that the financial incentives offered by GLAS had led some farmers to return to commonage use.

It was explained to me that the farmers returning to commonage-use have some adapting to do. First, many have crossbred their sheep for higher lamb weights and ease of management. However, these sheep are not hardy enough for mountain commonages. Second, some of those farmers are therefore seeking to purchase sheep from farmers with established commonage flocks. These established farmers are reluctant to sell to neighbours because of the incredibly strong habitual grazing habits of sheep, known as “hefting”. This means that any sheep they sell to their neighbour will continue grazing with the original flock, despite the change in ownership. Third, this means that returning farmers will have to go through the

established flock to separate out their sheep, thus creating disturbance. Fourth, some felt that these returning farmers would no longer have the knowledge, skills, or dogs required to carry out this work safely and without disrupting established flocks.

The alternative is to source sheep from elsewhere, which raises other problems. It was explained that some farmers are simply buying sheep at marts, driving them in a trailer to the commonage, and letting them out just inside the commonage gate. These sheep are not trained to go up the mountain, so they congregate at that gate. If ten farmers engage in this practice with 30 sheep each, then you have 300 sheep congregating around the commonage gate, resulting in severe localised overgrazing. This also potentially leaves other areas of the commonage with too few sheep resulting in under-grazing. The fear is that DAFM inspectors will arrive and penalise all shareholders for the overgrazed patch. I was also told by four separate farmers of the value of farmers with bigger flocks of sheep. One farmer explained that these are highly skilled, highly dedicated farmers. Without them, higher parts of the mountains would not be grazed at all. Farming these higher areas requires good physical conditioning, excellent sheep dogs, and full-time dedication to farming. These individuals are important for maintaining grazing levels in hard to reach areas of the commonage. I interviewed one such farmer and he was completely uninterested in entering GLAS because it might disrupt his farming practice and curtail his flock size. It is difficult to see how a comprehensive collective plan for a commonage could be designed without buy-in and support from these kinds of individuals.

There appears then to be different effort being expended by different shareholders due to differing ability, time constraints, off-farm employment, and other priorities. Nonetheless, the consequences of commonage management operate at a group level. It is significant that GLAS does not dictate the distribution of sheep within commonages. These policies only

dictate that commonage, like other farmland, must be kept in certain conditions. However, as one agri-environmental consultant told me, local knowledge is the vital element that allows farmers to manage farmland appropriately. In combination with ecological monitoring, agri-environment schemes may need to account for such knowledge in ways that enable appropriate commonage management. At the same time other agri-environmental consultants highlighted that competition exists between commonage farmers. The process of gathering farmer knowledge and incorporating it into a scheme is therefore complex and fostering support among farmers for any such scheme is very important. The next section of this report describes farmer experiences with the Locally Led Agri-Environment Scheme and gives some indication about how support and cooperative commonage management can be fostered and formalised.

The European Innovation Partnership Initiative (EIP)

The EIP represents a new opportunity for the implementation of locally led agri-environmental schemes. In Ireland's current Rural Development Programme (RDP) €20m has been ring-fenced for an open call for environmental projects from bottom-up Operational Groups. One such group exists in the case-study area. A small group of commonage farmers have driven local interest in the scheme, aided by strong institutional support. This section of the report describes how that Operational Group formed and cooperated to write an application for this scheme. This group was successful in advancing to the second round of this process and were among 20 groups selected nationally who received funding to produce and submit a more detailed second proposal. Unfortunately, this project was not among the 11 funded from the open call. Nonetheless, there are lessons to be taken from the process this group went through.

For interviewees, the appealing elements of the EIP proposal include farming towards a more sustainable and viable livelihood, increasing farmer input into scheme design, flexibility to amend farming practice on an on-going basis,



and a chance to initiate a collective management approach between farmers and institutions in the area. Moreover, many of our participants have seen this type of scheme functioning well in the Burren and feel that it could be adapted to their locality. The main findings are summarised here:

Summary of Issues Related to the EIP Proposal

1. Farmers driving the process want sustainable viable livelihoods, more input into agri-environment scheme design, and the flexibility to farm based on their own observations;
2. Motivated individuals were crucial in obtaining information, imagining potential, and starting a working EIP committee;
3. Roles in the EIP committee were influenced by previous working relationships;
4. New working relationships were also formed;
5. Certain actions helped unify the group such as consensus decision making, geographic representation, and surveying;
6. Facilitation helped to keep farmers at the centre of decision making;
7. Goals were aligned between the farmers and institutional actors;
8. Non-farming partners brought important skills and labour to the group;
9. The scheme requirements were navigated strategically;
10. The application was produced through voluntary labour and skills that may not be available to all groups in all areas.

Motivations: Farmer input and flexibility

The proposal designed by the EIP group aimed to protect the upland peats and biodiversity in the area. The proposed actions included shepherding to repair over-grazed “blackspots”, riparian zones around waterways, removing invasive species, management of wild goats, and a suite of educational and communicative actions. Many of the farmers interviewed were closely involved with the EIP application, and their motivations are likely stronger than the average farmer in the locality. Many of these farmers played an important positive role in driving the process, linking with partners, and encouraging participation in the community. It is thus important to understand their motivations. Of the 31 farmers interviewed, 19 highlighted that the EIP Proposal is appealing *because* it focuses on taking input from the farmer and may provide the flexibility to farm based on the farmer’s own observations. Many of these farmers contrasted the EIP with other schemes, such as GLAS, where they do not feel that they have enough input.

This small group of motivated farmers thus began reaching out to other farmers and institutions in the area. A committee formed that included farmers, the Local Development Company (LDC), the local Marine Institute research station, volunteers, County Council officers, Teagasc agri-environmental consultants, private agri-environmental consultants, Coillte, and NPWS staff. Each of these actors became involved in the group application process through different, but interwoven, avenues. This report focuses on four main groups. These are 1) the farmers, who initiated the process; 2) the Local Development Company, which facilitated the process; 3) the Marine Institute, NPWS, and volunteers, who provided critical technical skills; and 4) the Irish Wild Goats Society, whom the EIP group joined with, partially for tactical reasons. Several more individuals and groups made important contributions to the application. Those discussed were chosen for the particular lessons that can be derived.

Farmers, initiative, and consensus decision making

Three to five key individuals initiated the process with a public meeting. 70-80 interested farmers attended and began to creating a formal working committee for applying to the EIP. An expert gave a presentation explaining what was possible in the scheme. A committee of farmers and institutional partners, totalling roughly 20 individuals was then appointed to streamline decision making. The farmers on the committee were also tasked with keeping the broader group of roughly 200 farmers informed about any important decisions. Some of those who had initiated the process were selected for the committee. The remainder of the committee included other farmers selected for balanced geographical representation and institutional partners selected for tactical reasons.

The committee operated through a process of non-standardised consensus decision making, with decisions only taken if the entire committee agreed. Moreover, one farmer explained that everyone was willing to compromise and find alternatives when someone was not happy with a suggestion. Overall, interviewees felt that this process worked well, and few major grievances were expressed. One farmer explained that an alternative system of voting where a majority could push through decisions would pose the risk of splitting the group. Indeed, this farmer stated that on a number of occasions he put his personal preference aside and supported the group decision. This approach was shared by almost all of the farmers I interviewed. The key point is that the priority was to keep everyone on board. Avoiding division seems particularly important with a collectively owned resource such as commonage. One drawback of this approach is the time needed to discuss everything and the potential to throw out effective ideas that do not have universal support.

Previous schemes have also created some form of cohesion in the community. One farmer described a shared understanding among farmers who had to comply with destocking in the past. Additionally, many of the

farmers participate in the Walks and Rural Recreation scheme administered by the Local Development Company (LDC) that has been running since the 1990s. These walks pass through farmland, and so participating farmers maintain the trails on a rotational basis. For this work, they receive an annual compensation of around €500 each. Eight farmers on the EIP committee pointed out the successes of the walks scheme.

The Local Development Company and facilitation

The Local Development Company (LDC) played an important role co-ordinating the EIP application process. Ten farmer interviewees openly praised the LDC, and the organisation was seen as a suitable co-ordinator for a number of reasons. First, as one farmer explained, the LDC is staffed by local people, who understand local farmer concerns and the community. Second, the LDC was seen to possess the skills and knowledge to deal with complicated paperwork. Third, other participants pointed out that the LDC is neutral because it is not concerned with only one sector, such as agriculture, but is concerned with local development broadly. This meant that the LDC was seen as non-partisan. Finally, the LDC administers the Walks and Rural Recreation Scheme. This meant that if the application were successful the LDC could as coordinate the project without the labour and expense of setting up new accounting and debiting systems.

I discussed this role with the LDC facilitator. She emphasised that a key task was to keep farmers at the centre of major decisions. She was keenly aware of how crucial this undertaking was in ensuring that farmers had continual input and felt ownership over the scheme. Empowering the farmer committee to make decisions also helped communicate to the broader group of 200 farmers that this is a farmer-led scheme into which they can have input. As such, the facilitation provided by the LDC was important in helping to ensure an inclusive farmer-led approach.

Marine Institute and Volunteers

In contrast to the LDC, the Marine Institute did not have a formal working relationship with local farmers prior to the EIP application. Two scientists from this institution explained that they were able to bring particular skills such as grant writing, environmental, climate change, and ecological knowledge to the group. Farmers and Marine Institute staff were aware of the mutual benefits of working together. For the farmers, the Marine Institute skillset would aid in their efforts. For the Marine Institute, the EIP fits with their remit of enhancing marine environmental protection. The EIP also presented an opportunity for the Marine Institute to integrate its work more closely with the community, thus improving awareness of environmental sensitivities. As with the LDC, positive collaborations can lead to more positive collaborations.

The Marine Institute also hosted two volunteers who played an important role in aligning local farmer concerns with official policy objectives of the EIP. Highly motivated volunteers were recruited from a local third level institution. The volunteers aided the committee in designing a survey. The aim was to get an accurate picture of farmer concerns in relation to commonage management, but also to give them some form of input. The survey was distributed to all 200 local farmers by committee members. The main priorities that appeared in the gathered data included,

- Stock management;
- Improving grazing levels;
- Educational visits to other commonage areas;
- Cooperating on a sheep farming initiative;
- The removal of invasive species; and,
- Facilitating farm succession.

Conducting this exercise allowed the committee members who were drafting the application to align farmer concerns with the following RDP priorities:

enhancing the viability of farms; restoring, preserving, and enhancing biodiversity; Improving water management and pesticide management; preventing soil erosion; improving soil management; fostering carbon conservation. The final application was written based on this alignment.

NPWS, the Old Irish Goat Society, and strategic partnerships

As with the Marine Institute, the goals of additional groups were aligned with those of the EIP including the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and the Old Irish Goat Society (OIGS), both active in the locality. The NPWS' remit involves ensuring the protection of areas designated under EU environmental legislation, including much of the farmland in this case study area. The NPWS carry out monitoring of Irish habitats and wildlife on a continual basis, and manage a Ballycroy National Park to the north of our study area. The NPWS was therefore a valuable partner on the EIP committee. The main tension in relation to the NPWS joining the EIP committee relates to the NPWS' dual role of enforcing regulations while seeking to collaborate with farmers. From the interviews, it appears this process was relatively straightforward and without major contention. There are still lessons to be learned by describing the process through which farmer perceptions of the NPWS have changed in the case-study area.

The relationship between the NPWS and farmers has gone through periods of both cooperation and tension. For example, the NPWS partnered with the DAFM in implementing the destocking of the late 1990s. This resulted in some court cases with non-compliant landowners, which may have damaged NPWS-farmer relationships in the area. However, many farmer interviewees said that the NPWS has become more accommodating in recent years. Some farmers have noticed that the NPWS are very concerned about farmers abandoning the hills. I was told further, that the NPWS is realising as an institution that farmers should be centrally involved in designing and implementing commonage management solutions. Local commonage farmers and the NPWS now agree that farmers must be enabled to manage upland

commonages sustainably. For the farmers involved, this largely means maintaining their livelihoods and/or way of life and allowing them to use their knowledge to achieve the intended policy outcomes on their farmland. For the NPWS, sustainable commonage farming will ensure the protection of important habitats. The EIP Proposal is a collaborative step toward both goals. Relationships between farmers and local NPWS staff were also improved through face to face contact, attendance at community events, and involvement in local initiatives such as the EIP.

A final partner in the EIP Proposal that this report discusses is the Old Irish Goat Society (OIGS). The OIGS seeks to protect the indigenous wild Irish goat and the genetic resource that it embodies. A herd of these goats is active in the case study area and the OIGS were motivated by an absence of targeted funding to support genetic resources. The OIGS had considered submitting an independent EIP application with an animal genetic resources theme, but merged with our case study group early in the process. The two groups merged due to complementary goals and skillsets. Both groups are concerned with environmental conservation, and with highlighting the uniqueness of the area in terms habitats, water quality, species, and local development. Both groups were also motivated to present a unified local area to EIP assessors. In addition to the benefits mentioned above the, both groups felt that a merge would thus improve their chances of success.

Conclusion

This report has examined experiences of GLAS and the EIP Proposal among a small group of commonage farmers and associated institutional partners. GLAS is providing benefits to participating farmers, and participation among commonage farmers is very high. This report focused on challenges relating to GLAS participation in order to inform potential agri-environment scheme improvements. Challenges included upfront application costs, delayed payments, poor communication, uncertainty about requirements, and the concern that farmers would have to police each other. In addition, there were

issues stemming from broader commonage use phenomena, such as farmers returning to commonage-use. Most farmers were glad the scheme existed because of the benefits it provides and were thus participating. Yet, many felt that such a scheme needs more input from commonage farmers given the complex management involved. However, the difficulties of obtaining accurate local information were also highlighted.

In contrast with GLAS, the potential of an EIP supported locally led scheme presents a different approach to agri-environment scheme design. Cooperative processes were established by the Operational Group, which included various interested local groups, states agencies, public bodies and individuals. A highly motivated and knowledgeable group of farmers were active in the case study area, and a huge amount of voluntary labour and institutional support went into their EIP application. Additionally, the application benefitted from the presence of individuals with specialised skillsets in the areas of grant writing, facilitation, social research methods, agricultural policy, ecology, environmental and climate change science. The locally led model shows promise in terms of establishing locally embedded institutions to design and run agri-environment schemes at a scale that can account for different agricultural systems and landscapes. However, the same level of motivation, knowledge and expertise are unlikely to be present in every rural area. Therefore if the locally led model is to be expanded, it would be appropriate to run a concurrent funded programme of capacity building initiatives for individuals interested in forming Operational Groups.

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