



# THE HIDDEN TRUTH – Ireland

Environmental impact of new Rural Development Programmes – 2014-2020

One of the overarching aims of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform was to make it deliver more for the environment. This factsheet therefore analyses the quality of public spending. It looks at what hides behind the official numbers and what Irish Rural Development spending means for the environment, specifically for biodiversity.

## STATE OF PLAY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT:

The main environmental threats to Irish agricultural land are all related to the increasing intensification of agriculture. This includes the drainage of wetlands, ploughing and re-seeding of semi-natural grasslands, high levels of fertiliser and nutrient inputs, and loss of semi-natural habitats, particularly in marginal and upland areas. The loss of such habitats has substantial implications for greenhouse gas emissions (from ploughing carbon-rich soils and increasing numbers of intensively-managed livestock), water (increased run-off from agricultural lands as well as increased flooding from land drainage) and soils (through erosion and nutrient content) as well as for biodiversity.

100% of EU protected grassland habitats are in an unfavourable/bad condition.

## FARMLAND BIRD INDEX:

The Farmland Bird Index (FBI) in 2014 was based on 18 out of a possible 33 breeding farmland bird species in Ireland that are monitored by the Countryside Bird Survey (CBS). The FBI in 2014 was 93% of what the baseline index was in 2000. While trends overall have been broadly stable since monitoring began during the late 1990s, it is important to note that acute declines are known to have taken place in several of Ireland's breeding bird populations, especially farmland birds, since the 1970s. Significant range declines have been shown when distributions during breeding atlases in 1968-72, 1988-92 and 2007-11 are compared.

Although there has been an increase in the range of some farmland bird indicator species (e.g. Tree Sparrow, Buzzard), by and large results indicate a dramatic decline in the range of a number of traditional farmland birds and ground-nesting species, including Lapwing and Whinchat. Farmland bird species now constitute the largest single group (14) of the 37 breeding birds on the current Irish Red List.

## RURAL DEVELOPMENT BUDGET FOR 'ECOSYSTEMS': theory and practice

The implementation of EU Rural Development (RD) programmes should fulfill a number of set objectives and priorities. While 73.5% of the RD money in Ireland has been allocated to measures that *should* directly benefit biodiversity, water and soil<sup>1</sup>, the reality is that not all measures for which this money has been earmarked have high environmental value. These measures may, at best, benefit nature indirectly, such as payments for farming in Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC), but they are not tied to concrete environmental targets and benefits. Indeed, in Ireland the largest share of money under this priority (48%) will go to ANC farming. With 75% of Ireland's Utilisable Agricultural Area (UAA) eligible for this type of support, reform of this measure is urgently required to improve its delivery on concrete environment and biodiversity-related objectives.

Some funds have been earmarked for 'Natura 2000 and Water Framework Directive (WFD)', amounting to 2.6% (ca. €73 million) of spending for biodiversity, water and soils.

<sup>1</sup> Priority 4, as foreseen by the Rural Development Regulation, Art. 5



## AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SPENDING: past vs. future

In Ireland 31% of RD money will be spent on Agri-Environment measures (AEC) – this is a 40% cut compared to the previous spending period, despite the fact that Member States were required to maintain AEC funding levels<sup>2</sup>. However, more than 30% of the agri-environment budget has been allocated to targeted, i.e. 'dark green', wildlife schemes, namely regionally-targeted schemes supporting priority farmland bird species and a wild bird cover.

### What do we mean by 'dark green' agri-environment measures:

The European Court of Auditors, in its special report from 2011\* looking at the effectiveness of agri-environment, recommended that agri-environment schemes should be more precisely targeted and there should be a higher rate of EU contribution for sub-measures with a higher environmental potential. In our analysis we have looked at what proportion of the agri-environment budget has been allocated to targeted, as we call them 'dark green', schemes for biodiversity. As the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and Rural Development plans do not recognise such a category, we have worked with regional and national experts to assess measures, using the following principles: The scheme has been considered 'dark green' if it is targeted at specific species (group of species), habitats or a specific biodiversity problem (pollinator strips).

\* **ECA Special report no 7/2011:** Is agri-environment support well designed and managed?

## FARM BIODIVERSITY CONTRACTS INSUFFICIENT TO REACH EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY OBJECTIVES:

The EU's Biodiversity Strategy clearly states that by 2020 the area of farmland covered by biodiversity-related measures must be maximised in order to achieve a measurable improvement of species dependent on, or affected by, agriculture.

The Irish government claims that 20.8% of farmland will be covered under voluntary contracts for biodiversity protection, but measures under the new RDP, that could be genuinely beneficial for biodiversity, are only applicable to 14% of Irish farmland.

As well as two schemes that directly target wild- and farmland birds (8,400ha and 195,300ha, respectively), the Irish Rural Development Programme includes other schemes which should benefit biodiversity, such as support for traditional hay meadows, low input grazing, management of Natura 2000 sites, establishment and management of hedgerows and enhancing nesting opportunities for birds. However, the requirements linked to most of these schemes are so low that it is unclear how much of the €710 million foreseen for these will effectively generate concrete biodiversity benefits. Although species targeted through the Farmland Birds scheme (such as Chough, Corncrake, Grey Partridge, Hen Harrier, Twite, and some breeding waders, geese and swans at certain sites) should benefit from the proposed measures, other

<sup>2</sup> Rural Development Regulation, Recital 22.



species of conservation concern in the wider countryside (such as Lapwing, Barn Owl or Yellowhammer) are unlikely to benefit from the untargeted conservation actions.

## INACTION ON NATURA 2000

No measure of the RDP specifically addresses the needs of the Natura 2000 network in Ireland as required by the Rural Development Regulation<sup>3</sup>. Of the 560,000ha of farmed Natura 2000 area (4.1% of UAA) only 75% appears to be eligible for the implementation of agri-environment measures.

The small amount available for a new scheme called 'Farmland Habitat' on private Natura 2000 farmland (ca. €73 million, i.e. 1.9% of total RDP budget) can deliver practically nothing for the management of these sites as it only represents income support with no specific action required. Species-specific and targeted agri-environment farmland bird measures, within Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for Breeding Waders, Chough, Corncrake, Hen Harrier and some geese and swan sites, have the biggest potential to provide synergies with reaching Natura 2000 objectives.

## EUROPE NEEDS:

1. To ensure that a well-designed greening and reinforced cross compliance represent a firm baseline for Pillar 2 environmental measures. This could help free up money for more efficient and targeted measures that benefit the environment and biodiversity.

*These baselines should be properly set and checked so as to create an equal level playing field for all farmers in Europe – special attention is needed on issues such as integrated pest management, water and soil. The Commission should urgently start to work on including the Water Framework Directive and Sustainable Use of Pesticides Directive directly into cross compliance so that the uncertainty around what is the baseline and what is not, is removed.*

2. To ensure that the CAP is designed in a way which helps reach the EU Biodiversity Strategy goals by 2020. So far evidence shows that the agriculture target is the most problematic.

*In Pillar 2 this can only be done through proper funding of the Natura 2000 Network and the Priority 'Habitats and species' as defined in the Birds and Habitats Directives.*

3. To have a genuine system for tracking environmental spending. Only measures with clear environmental objectives and delivery can be included. Areas of Natural Constraints (ANCs) must not be counted as environmentally-beneficial measures as there are no environmental obligations or management requirements attached to the payments.

*At best, ANC has an indirect positive effect for biodiversity and the environment. However, in the worst case they are just income support which is pushing damaging intensification. The purpose of the ANC payments – to fight against abandonment or compensate farmers to work in more difficult areas – remains difficult to justify when compared to the direct income support of the first pillar. At best it is proof of the duality of the CAP where Pillar 1 is a driver for large and intensified farms and Pillar 2 a way to counter this drive. This duality should be ended and a targeted instrument should be devised which supports extensive farming systems that provide high environmental value but are not economically viable.*

<sup>3</sup> Rural Development Regulation, Art. 8



**4.** To ensure proper monitoring of the Rural Development schemes' delivery.

*It is not possible to know if investments in rural development are really delivering benefits for biodiversity without this evaluation.*

**Conclusion:** Europe needs to take a proper look at the whole of its agricultural policy and how it is working together or against environmental commitments and priorities. Even if Rural Development can be a large part of the answer and has the potential to play a positive role in many parts of Europe, the figures unfortunately show adjustments are necessary for this policy to truly deliver towards its objectives. It is now clear that this reformed CAP still has a long way to go before it can be called green.

**IRELAND NEEDS:**

- 1.** To keep going with the consultation efforts put in place by the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in developing the Rural Development Programme in future.
- 2.** To take example of the targeted approach for wild and farmland birds and to expand this type of scheme to other species groups and habitats.
- 3.** Support to targeted schemes elsewhere within the Rural Development Programme with non-productive investments (e.g. for habitat creation), advisory support, research and monitoring.
- 4.** A reform of payments for farmers in Areas with Natural Constraints to ensure that they also generate concrete benefits for biodiversity, water and soil.

**SOURCES**

EC Factsheet for 201-2020 Rural development programme for Ireland: [http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/country-files/ie/factsheet\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/country-files/ie/factsheet_en.pdf)

The data in this factsheet is based on the first version of the Rural Development Programme in Ireland.

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