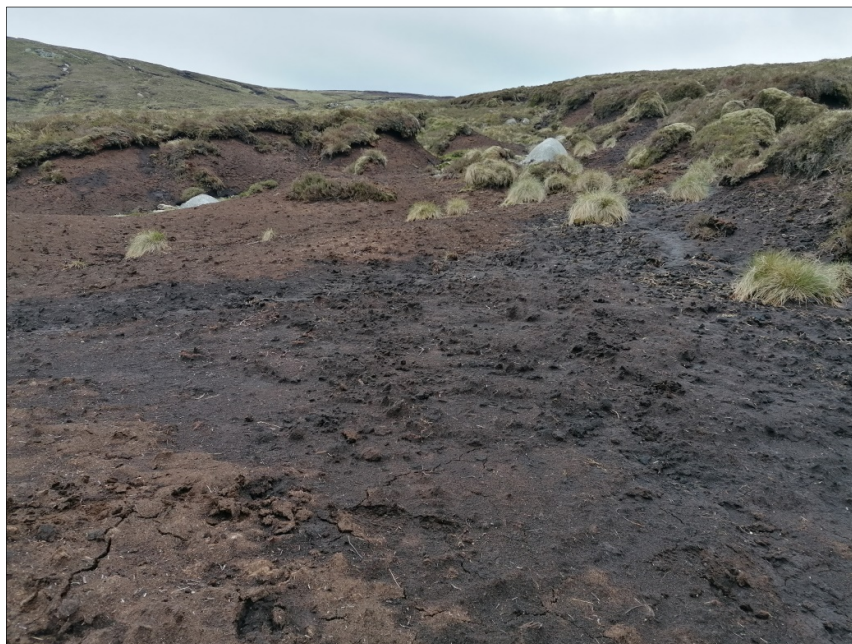


Balynultagh Commonage

2021 Ecological Survey



Final Report

10th October 2021

Faith Wilson BSc CEnv MCIEEM



Faith Wilson

ECOLOGICAL CONSULTANT

Faith Wilson Ecological Consultant BSc CEnv MCIEEM
Kestrel Ridge, Tigroney West, Avoca, Co. Wicklow

Balynultagh Commonage

2021 Ecological Survey

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. SUAS Vegetation Management Measures	3
3. 2021 Walkover Survey	4
3.1 Upland Gully Woodland Restoration/Native Woodland Establishment	4
3.3 Eroding and Burnt Areas	5
4. Appendix 1. Maps & Management Recommendations	8

Balynultagh Commonage

2021 Ecological Survey

1. Introduction

A baseline habitat condition and ecological survey and habitat management plan was prepared for the **Balynultagh** Commonage in 2019¹ and the measures within same underwent screening for Appropriate Assessment².

There is a single grazer on this commonage and management prescriptions were drawn up in a management plan for the site in 2019.

As described in the baseline ecology report the Annex I habitats within Balynultagh Commonage are currently not achieving favourable conservation status. Under Fossitt's (2000) habitat classification scheme the dominant habitat within Balynultagh commonage is that of **Dry Humid Acid Grassland GS3** found in a mosaic with **Montane Heath HH4** on the ridge and summit while below this are areas of **Upland Blanket Bog PB2** and **Eroding Blanket Bog PB5** with **Dry Heath HH1** on the peat hags. The summit of Mullaghcleevaun East Top consists of peat substrate eroded to **gravel bed rock (ER1)** over 75% with scattered **eroding peat hags (PB5)**. These habitats correspond to the Annex I habitats **4030 Dry Heath, 4060 Alpine and Boreal Heaths** and **7130 Blanket Bog**.

The management prescriptions in the plan set out to address the impacts highlighted in this report if progress is to be made towards attaining **Favourable status** for the Annex I habitats present on the site – principally severely damaged **7130 Blanket Bog, 4030 Dry Heath** and **4060 Alpine and Boreal Heath** in the long term as well as protection of the existing acid grassland resource which in parts is being actively smothered by eroding peat.

The major impacts arise from a legacy of decades of severe and uncontrolled burning resulting in extensive areas of peat erosion along the summits and ridges (impacting on upland blanket bog and montane heath) with subsequent severe peat erosion, damage and losses to montane heath and dry heath habitat, inappropriate grazing (from sheep and also from deer), which has not allowed burnt areas to recover, and has also favoured the development of species-poor acid grassland over heath. Overgrazing is also contributing to erosion on the ridges and summits coupled with natural exposure and erosion following burning activities.

The extent of habitats present within the commonage and their affinities to either Fossitt (Level 3) or Annex I habitats on the Balynultagh Commonage were mapped as presented on **Figures 1 and 2 (See Appendix 1)** and their conservation status was assessed and mapped as shown on **Figure 3 (See Appendix 1)**. A series of management prescriptions were drawn up for the commonage as detailed in **Table 1** below and mapped on **Figure 4 (See Appendix 1)**.

¹ Wilson, F. (2019). Ecological Baseline Survey prepared for Balynultagh Commonage as part of the Commonage Management Plan for SUAS. 9th December 2019. Unpublished report for SUAS EIP.

² Wilson, F. (2020). Report for Screening for Appropriate Assessment for a Commonage Management Plan at Balynultagh, Co. Wicklow in accordance with the requirements of Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive. 16th January 2020. Unpublished report for SUAS EIP.

2. SUAS Vegetation Management Measures

The proposed management measures for the Ballynultagh commonage in 2019 under SUAS were as follows:

Year 1 (2020)

1. No burning to be carried out on any of the site
2. Try to keep sheep down off the eroded areas by shepherding them and through the use of feed buckets to encourage grazing lower down on the undamaged areas of the hill.
3. Fence off at least two enclosure sites in the bare peat areas to see what effect grazing animals are having on them.
4. Fence off a further two enclosure sites to trial some restoration measures under the direction of the project ecologist.

Year 2 (2021)

1. No burning to be carried out on any of the site
2. Try to keep sheep down off the eroded areas by shepherding them and through the use of feed buckets to encourage grazing lower down on the undamaged areas of the hill.
3. Maintain the fences on the enclosure sites and continue with any restoration measures being carried out.

Year 3 (2022)

1. No burning to be carried out on any of the site
2. Try to keep sheep down off the eroded areas by shepherding them and through the use of feed buckets to encourage grazing lower down on the undamaged areas of the hill.
3. Maintain the fences on the enclosure sites and continue with any restoration measures being carried out.

Shepherding

Average time per shepherding: 4 Hours

No of times sheep are to be shepherded: Average of 2-3 Times per week while sheep are on the hill.

Identified objective of the shepherding:

- Sheep to be moved off area of bare and eroding peat. Move own sheep back down the hill and sheep from neighbouring hills back onto their own hills.
- Monitor sheep health for signs of tick diseases.
- Count numbers of deer grazing the commonage and areas they are grazing.

Other works to be carried out for entire commonage

Use feed buckets to encourage sheep grazing away from the damaged and eroding areas.

Details of sheep stocking rates proposed

Sheep grazing activity shall be monitored accurately for the first year and grazing pressure modified after that depending on habitat condition.

Grazing Management

In year 1, accurate records of stock actually grazing on the commonage shall be kept to determine what exactly is happening at present. From this, a detailed grazing plan shall be developed for future years.

Ecological Assessment

The commonage was surveyed in June 2021 by Faith Wilson to examine and review the implementation of the proposed measures and make any recommendations regarding same. The observations and recommendations from this visit are set out below.

3. 2021 Walkover Survey

The following observations, comments on same and recommendations on the works completed in 2021 are presented.

3.1 Upland Gully Woodland Restoration/Native Woodland Establishment

The establishment of gully woodland along the two watercourses in the commonage through a variety of techniques was conducted in early 2021. These works were very well executed.



Plate 1. Restoration of native woodland habitat along the watercourses began in 2021.



Plate 2. Planted and naturally occurring trees along the watercourse.

3.3 Eroding and Burnt Areas

These areas will be tackled in 2021/2022 with the assistance of NPWS.

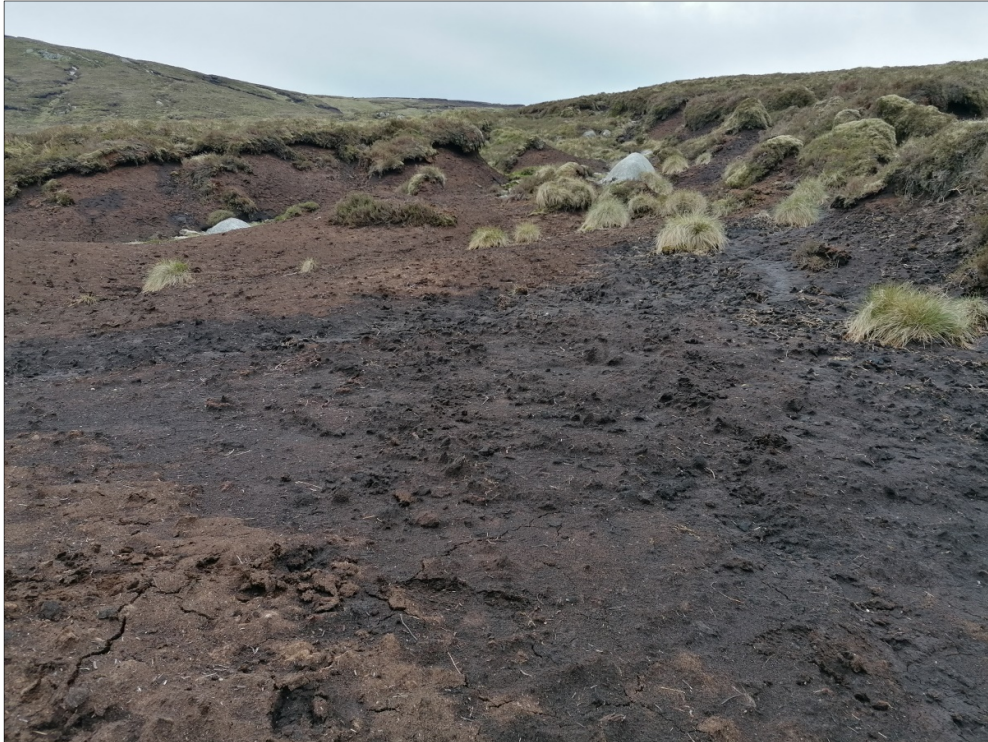


Plate 3. Severe erosion.



Plate 4. A variety of measures will be trialled to try to stop and reverse peat erosion.



Plate 5. Eroding peat smothering existing vegetation.



Plate 6. Severe erosion towards Mullaghcleevaun.

4. Appendix 1. Maps & Management Recommendations

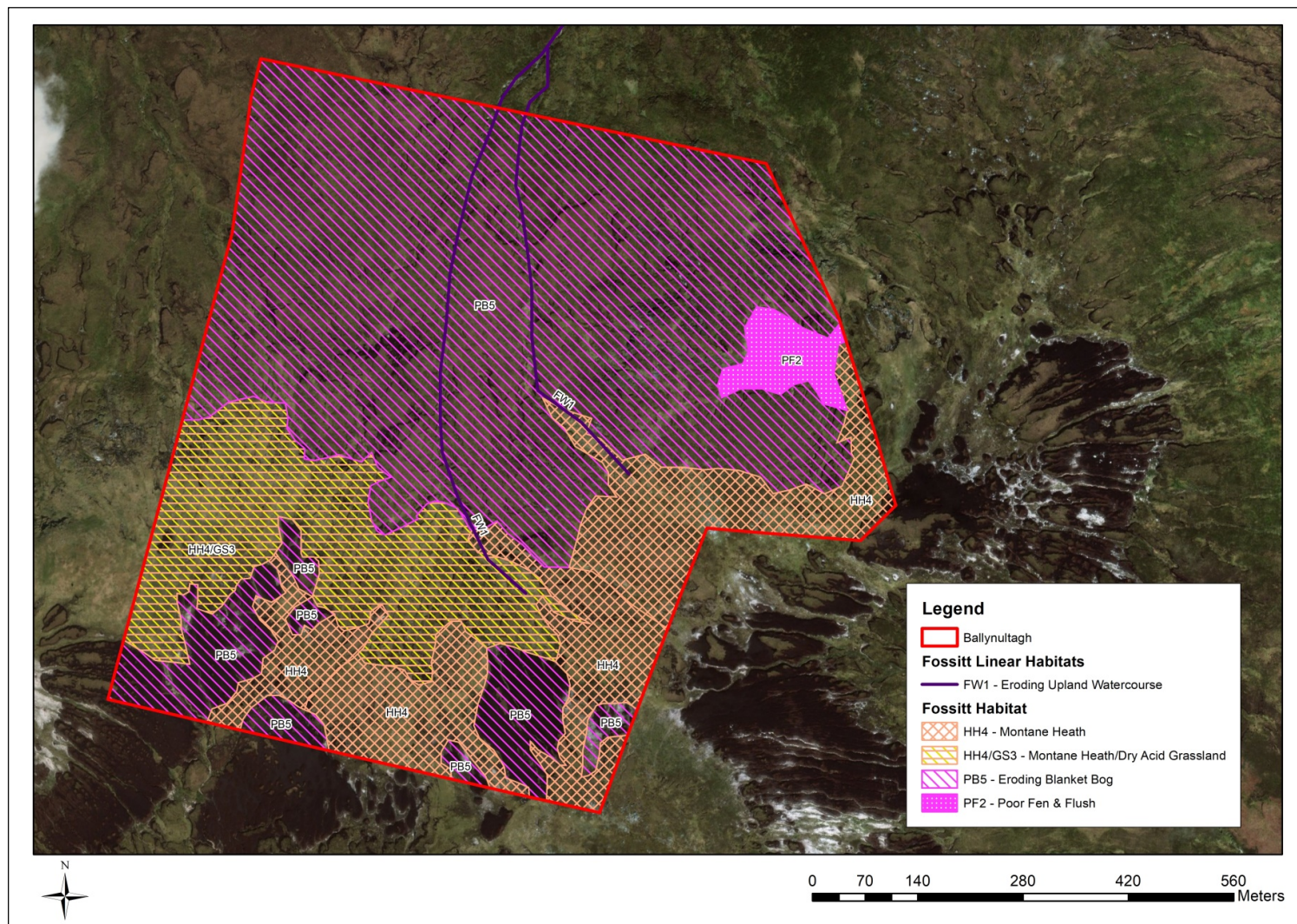


Figure 1. Habitats mapped to Level Three (Fossitt, 2000) within the Balynultagh commonage.

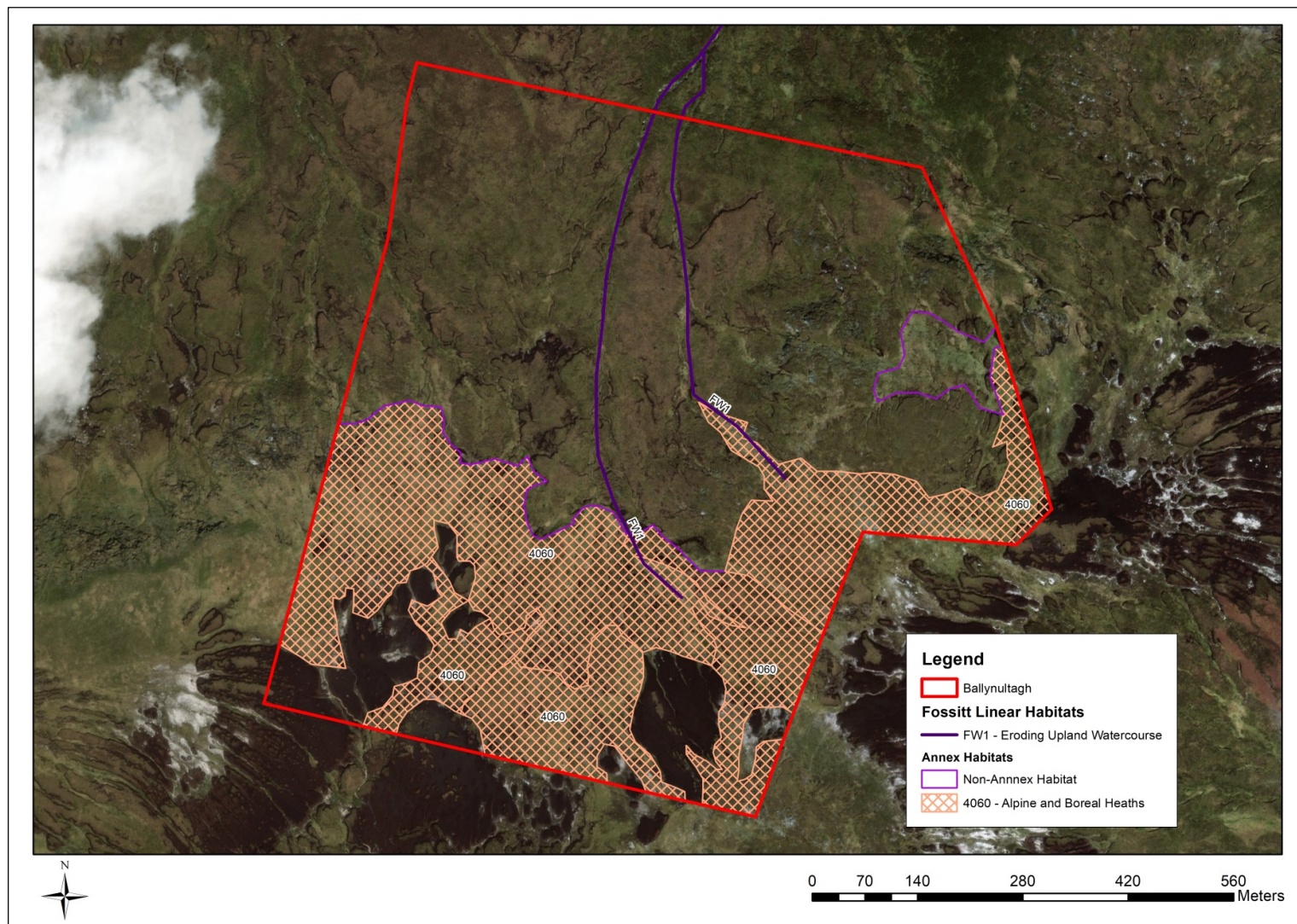


Figure 2. Habitats mapped according to their correspondence with Annex I habitats within the Ballynultagh commonage.

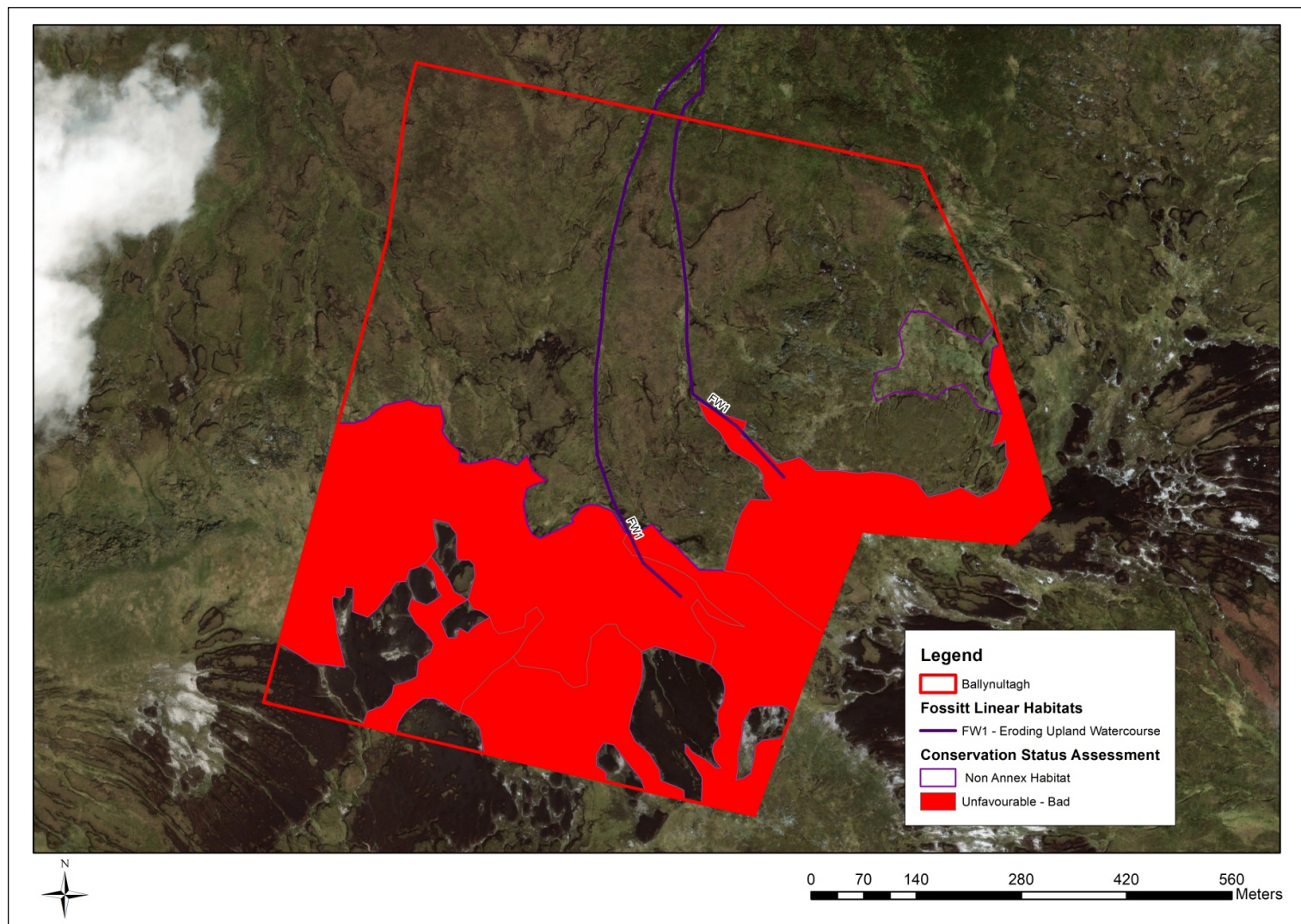


Figure 3. Habitat Condition Assessment for Ballynultagh Commonage.

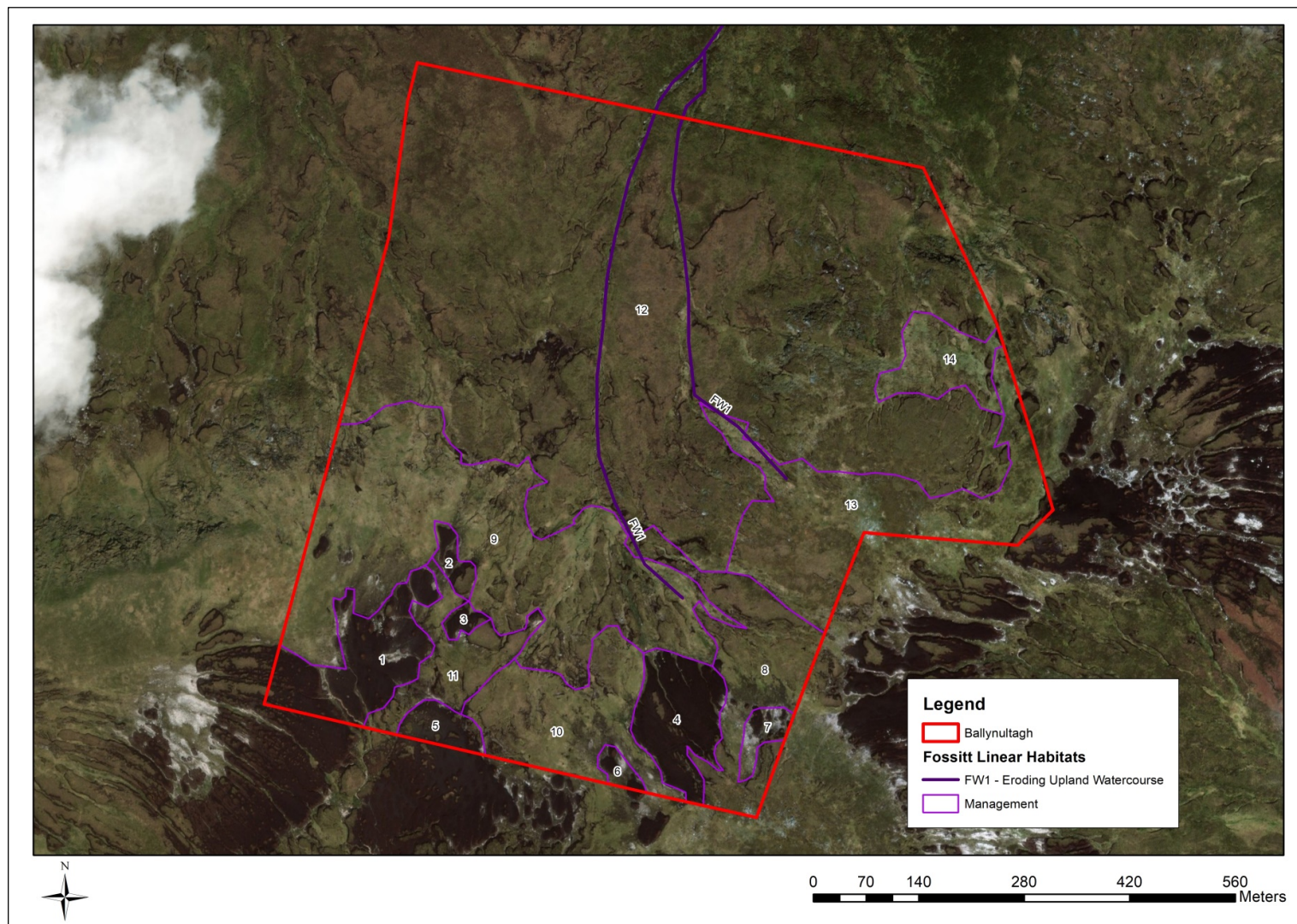


Figure 4. Management measures for Ballynultagh.

Table 1. Habitats present on Balynultagh Commonage and Management Recommendations.

Area	Recommendation
All	No further burning
All	Destock the hill of grazing animals and allow the habitats to recover
All	Control deer
All	Shepherd out trespassing sheep
8, 9, 12	Restoration measures for eroding bog
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Restoration measures for areas of bare peat
8, 9, 10, 11, 13	Restoration measures for areas of montane heath
10	Erect deer exclosures to determine effects of deer and trespassing sheep