

SUAS PROJECT

Sustainable Development of the
Wicklow/Dublin Uplands

Annual Report

Year 2020



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Project Summary

The Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) is a pilot project with the objective of developing innovative and sustainable solutions to the economic and environmental challenges facing farmers and communities in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands.

The project aims to address these challenges through the following actions;

- (i) Establish and effectively activate new commonage management groups to take responsibility for the management of commonages by its shareholders.
- (ii) Complete ecological baseline surveys of individual upland areas to assess what is there, the condition it is in and make recommendations for its management.
- (iii) Increase farmer knowledge of the environmental and management issues on their upland areas, leading to the development of commonage/upland management plans jointly by the farmers, the ecologist and the relevant stakeholders. As the farmers are involved in developing the plans, we expect them to be more practical and for the farmers to be more likely to carry out all elements of the plan.
- (iv) Support the farmers in implementing their management actions by providing necessary training & support and to trial the practicality of these actions on an upland farmed area. Where actions are deemed practical, we plan to develop guidelines on necessary training & support required the appropriateness of the action and costing.
- (v) To develop sustainable grazing regimes for the areas.

The final output of the project is to provide a proven model framework and approach to assist Irish and European upland farmers and communities facing similar economic and environmental challenges to develop their own solutions.

The project commenced in 2018 and will run until the end of 2022, with a budget of €1.95m. There are currently 46 commonage farmers on 7 commonages and 3 non-commonage farmers participating in the project. The total land area managed in the project is 2,786ha and the locations of all the sites are shown on map at the end of this report.

Operation Group

The European Innovations Partnership (EIP) projects were developed and are being implemented by Operational Groups, harnessing the strong collaborative model established through the EIP-AGRI Operational Group structure, with farmers who know their own land, working closely with relevant stakeholders, Government Departments and state agencies. The SUAS Operation Group contains a range of individuals, each bringing knowledge and expertise that will ensure maximum delivery from the project. Our group is made up as follows;

- Pat Dunne:** Project chair. Farmer, Wicklow Uplands Council (WUC) member, former IFA National Hill Chair
- Declan Byrne:** Teagasc Drystock Adviser in Wicklow for 20 yrs. On secondment from Teagasc to the role of Project Manager,
- Sean Byrne:** Farmer & former chair of WUC
- Tom Byrne:** Farmer, Current Chair of WUC, Member Wicklow IFA
- Enda Mullen:** Divisional Ecologist with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), former District Conservation Officer with NPWS based in Wicklow Mountains National Park
- Helen Sheridan:** Farm Landscape Ecology and Agri-Environment Policy Lecturer in UCD, school of Agriculture and Food Science
- Monica Gorman:** agricultural extension and innovation lecturer in UCD, School of Agriculture and Food Science
- Owen Carton:** Independent consultant. Has extensive experience in the agri-environmental sector including research, research management, administration, operations, policy development, Foresight, and change management.
- Donal O'Keeffe:** Community Water Officer, Local Authority Waters Programme
- Catherine Keena:** Teagasc Countryside Management Specialist
- Brian Dunne:** Coordinator of Wicklow Uplands Council
- Larry O'Loughlin:** Former Teagasc Regional Manager, covering both Wicklow & Dublin at various times. Former ASA President

Work to date

2018 (Phase 1)

The project commenced in February 2018 and in phase 1, following a selection process, three commonages and one non-commonage upland farmer were selected. A facilitator was contracted in to work with the project manager to help form commonage groups for each of the commonages with a formal constitution and elected officers. This was completed for all three commonages in December 2018 and a report on the process is published on the project webpage, including a template for commonage group constitutions¹.

Ecological baseline surveys were completed for each of the selected areas, with the ecologist making recommendations for the management of each site. The farmer then met with the ecologist on their site to walk it together and discuss the condition of the site, the current management and to develop the management plan for the farmers to implement. A copy of the baseline survey for each site is also published on our webpage.

There was work carried out on each site during 2019 including; controlled burning, cutting of vegetation, spraying of bracken, bracken bruising and active shepherding of sheep. The management of sheep numbers, timing of grazing and the locations of actual grazing on the hills is being recorded for the first year of participation and in consultation with the ecologist and the management plan, a detailed grazing plan shall be drawn up.

2019 (Phase 2)

Phase 2 of the project commenced in 2019, with 3 further commonages and 2 non-commonage areas selected. The commonage farmers went through the process of forming their commonage groups and developing their constitutions to officially form their commonage groups. The ecological baseline surveys for each of these sites was completed and copies given to the farmers in advance of meeting the ecologist to develop their management plans. Phase 2 participants had their management plans agreed by the end of November 2019.

2020 Report

The SUAS operation group decided to take an additional commonage into the project under phase 2 subject to available funding. This commonage was selected during phase 2 applications and the commonage group formation process was completed by them along with the other phase two commonages in 2019. An ecological baseline survey was completed for this commonage in early 2020. Commonage Management Plans were agreed for all phase 2 sites and appropriate permissions were obtained from NPWS & the Dept of Agriculture in early 2020.

¹ <https://wicklowuplands.ie/suas-reports/>

Workshop

In January 2020, a workshop was held in Laragh, Co Wicklow for all phase 1 & phase 2 participants. The workshop was facilitated by the project manager and Bobby Lambert, and representatives from each commonage were in attendance. The objectives were as follows;

1. To allow discussion between commonage groups and non-commonage participants on their experiences in the project to date
2. To discuss how the participants thought the SUAS Project was progressing to date
3. To identify the supports they need going forward in the project.

The following actions were identified by the participants and following discussions were to be prioritised by the PM for delivery by SUAS;

- Host an event for SUAS Farmers each year out on one commonage to give advice & information to SUAS farmers on both production & habitats.
- Study Tour
- More information out to the public
- Health & Safety
- Encourage Young Farmers
- Manage Water Quality
- Continuity After 2020

Other issues were also identified by the participants, but were outside the scope of the SUAS Project or require further refinement for inclusion in SUAS.

Farmer Meetings

Meetings with all the commonage groups took place in the Jan/Feb 2020 before covid19 restrictions and further meetings were held in early summer to update progress and plan for autumn work programmes. These meetings were to agree and monitor work plans for 2020 and how they were being delivered.

Recordings of grazing activity on the uplands to date have shown that there are too many sheep grazing the sites in the mid-July to September period, and not enough grazing at other times of the year. Plans for 2020 involved the farmers changing their grazing patterns over a 2-3 year period, so that by 2022, they will have appropriate stocking rates on the hills. For some farmers this involves sourcing or breeding more suitable sheep to graze the uplands as their current flocks are not suitable. A number of farmers are opting to develop 2 separate flocks on their farms; one for the uplands and a separate higher output flock for the lowland area of the farm.

Works carried out in 2020



In February, further fire breaks were cut on some of the hills and preparations for controlled burning were made, but the weather didn't allow any burning to be carried out by the end of February. A report was submitted to NPWS on this.

Controlled burning was carried out on two commonages in September 2020 following a spell of dry weather. While it was difficult to get a good burn due to greener vegetation at this time of year, it was relatively successful and proved that it is possible to carry out controlled burning on some sites in the autumn (again subject to suitable weather conditions).



Some heather & gorse mulching was carried out in February, but again weather hampered works with very wet ground conditions. It was decided to carry out mulching in the autumn



in future years when ground conditions for machinery are better. Heather mulching on Carrigeenduff commonage was carried out in November, using a team of contractors with brushcutters. Areas mulched were 10-15m by 10-15m and dispersed throughout a large area of dense heather that is inaccessible to machinery. On Kilmashogue, the same contractors cut gorse & heather to create firebreaks and also mulched stands of gorse dispersed through good quality heather to control its spread.

There was bracken spraying carried out on a number of sites, using knapsack sprayers, quads with hand lances and a tractor sprayer. Bracken to be treated was targeted at areas where bracken is spreading into Dry Heath habitats and also along pathways where it is difficult to move stock along. Bracken bruising was carried out on a second site this year and continued

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on the site from 2019, showing great results in reducing new growth and removing layers of dead litter.

Cattle were introduced to a Corrasillagh commonage also to see if they can control bracken and Molina in difficult to access areas of the commonages. Galloway cattle were chosen as they are bred for this type of vegetation, with 7 cows sourced with the plan being to keep these animals on the hill for most of the year.



There were repairs carried out to access roadways on a number of sites to improve access for farming management and make it safer to use. This work mainly concentrated on water management with minimum disturbance or impact to surrounding areas. Contractors were hired in to complete this work on one site, while the farmers themselves completed the works on two other sites. Some of the repaired tracks, while mainly for management access did also provide the added benefit of improved recreational access.

Summary of works carried out in 2020

- Bracken Spraying: By tractor & Sprayer
By knapsack sprayer
- Bracken bruising: Using quad & bracken bruiser
Using tractor & crimper roller
- Gorse Mulching: By tractor & forestry mulcher
By tracked excavator & mulcher head
By hand using chainsaws & brushcutters
- Heather mulching: By hand using brushcutters
By tractor & suitable flail mower
- Access Works: Repairs to access roads on 4 sites (for management rather than walkers). Various sized excavators used.
- Cattle Grazing: Cattle were introduced to a further commonage for bracken & Molina control
- Controlled Burning:
- Firebreak cutting: To act as a firebreak in case of wildfire
To prepare for controlled burning

Further planned training & study tours did not proceed due to Covid restriction.

Training

A number of training courses were delivered (subject to Covid restrictions) to participants, including 2 quad safety courses & 2 safe pesticide use courses, which were fully attended and farmers received certificates for.

A set of Health & Safety Guidelines for working in the uplands was developed and given to all participants. These are designed as good practice guidelines rather than being extra bureaucracy for the farmers and have been passed on to the other EIP projects and Teagasc for use in the wider hill farming areas.



Severe erosion has been found on two of the new sites taken into the project. The Dept. of Agriculture & various sections of NPWS were invited to walk these sites to discuss the extent of the problem and the possible restoration works that could be carried out.

Dissemination

The project has developed a dedicated webpage <http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/suasproject/> and a Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/SUASproject/> for sharing information about our activities and progress to date.

In January 2020, there was a joint SUAS/Teagasc sheep event held in Glenasmole, Co Dublin. This event was aimed at active hill sheep farmers, promoting good sheep performance combined with habitat management. Over 60 farmers turned up and the event was a great success in an area where there has previously been very little agricultural advisory activity.



The project manager presented a paper at the Teagasc National Hill Sheep Conference in Donegal, in February, to show what SUAS is doing and how we hope to develop a blueprint for future upland schemes across the whole country.

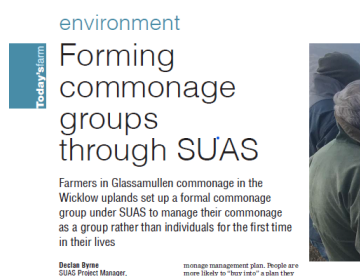
We created a number of short videos in association with Teagasc, showcasing what SUAS is doing and released them through various social media platforms. These have helped to increase the profile of the project to farmers



outside our region and promotes the EIP project as part of agricultural production rather than being seen as just an agri-environmental scheme.

A Teagasc Walsh Fellow master's student commenced his study based on the project in January. His study will look at the farmer attitudes towards commonage groups and their functioning. He will also be examining the Knowledge Transfer (KT) needs of hill farmers and how best to engage with them for delivering this information.

Due to Covid 19 restrictions, further planned demonstration events planned for 2020 had to be postponed.



Today's Farm article in March 2020, focusing on the formation of Commonage Groups and the farmers' experience of them to date.

Preliminary Findings to date

Commonage Groups have proven to be an effective way of dealing with commonage management. They have provided a platform for commonage farmers to work together and to jointly make management decisions for the long-term future of their commonage.

We have looked at the practicality of the main management measures required on upland areas, and are costing out the various options. All are possible, but the costs may be prohibitive or require better targeting of these measures, which we will explore further in coming years.

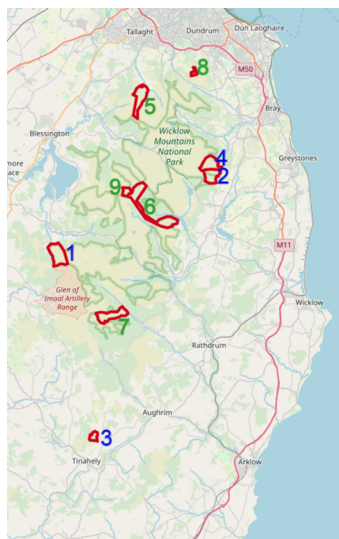
Grazing management is essential for the long-term management of our uplands. Numbers of grazing animals is important, but also the timing of this grazing. Current grazing patterns in the Wicklow & Dublin Mountains, which have been driven by economics and various agri & agri-environmental schemes, are not appropriate for habitat management on a lot of sites.

The grazing required on individual sites varies greatly due to local conditions and pressures, and it is not appropriate to come up with generic stocking rates. On unfenced areas, we need to co-ordinate grazing with surrounding commonage/areas, to prevent changes on one LPIS plot area having negative effects on surrounding LPIS plots.

We need planning at landscape level for our upland areas. In Wicklow, we have one area of over 10,000ha, containing over 30 LPIS plots, with no fences and a mosaic of habitat types and conditions within it. Trying to plan individual LPIS plots in isolation from surrounding areas could lead to negative impacts on surrounding plots

We encountered a lack of knowledge and support when trying to tackle peatland restoration works on eroded areas. It was agreed with local NPWS staff to conduct our own trial works in 2021 on a number of sites, the details to be finalised in spring 2021.

SUAS Participants 2020



Phase 1

- 1 Granamore
- 2 Glassamullen
- 3 Ballybeg
- 4 Powerscourt Paddocks

Phase 2

- 5 Glassavulaun
- 6 Carrigeenduff
- 7 Corrsillagh
- 8 Kilmashogue
- 9 Ballynultagh
- 10 Slievemweel

