Slievemweel Commonage

2021 Ecological Survey

Final Report

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1. Introduction

A baseline habitat condition and ecological survey and habitat management plan was prepared for the **Slievemweel** Commonage in 2020[1] and the measures within same underwent screening for Appropriate Assessment[2].

A Commonage Management group was established for the commonage and the implementation of the management prescriptions in the plan began in 2020.

The management prescriptions in the SUAS plan for the commonage set out to address the impacts highlighted in that report so progress is made towards attaining **Favourable status** for the Annex I habitats present on the site – principally **4010 Northern Atlantic Wet Heaths with *Erica tetralix*** and **4030 Dry Heath** as well as protection of the existing acid grassland resource.

The major impacts on this hill arise from a legacy of years of uncontrolled burning which has damaged the heath habitats on the hill. As a result, the majority of the habitat areas on the hill are currently assessed as being in **Unfavourable Status.**

The extent of habitats present within the commonage and their affinities to either Fossitt (Level 3) or Annex I habitats on the Slievemweel 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).**

2. SUAS Vegetation Management Measures

The proposed management measures for the Slievemweel commonage in 2020 under SUAS were as follows:

Year 1 (2020)

1. Cut back self-seeded Sitka spruce trees in area 2
2. Use a bracken bruiser in area 5 and area 6, where it is accessible by a quad. Note-Care must be taken when using quad on rough or steep ground and obstacles should be marked in advance or by somebody walking in front of the quad. To be done in early-June and again in mid-August.
3. Cut gorse bushes in area 14 with a tractor mounted mulcher. Large stones/rocks should be identified for contractor to prevent damage to machine. Cut gorse in area 3 if accessible by tractor, but do not cut the broadleaf trees growing there. Other areas of gorse that are easily accessible by tractor in areas on the south side of the commonage may also be mulched.
4. Individual or small clumps of gorse in area 5 may be control burned. This shall only be done during the legal burning period and shall be properly controlled as directed by the project manager. The project manager shall provide training, required equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE), and relevant notifications and permit applications shall be made in advance.

[1] Wilson, F. (2020). Ecological Baseline Survey prepared for Slievemweel Commonage as part of the Commonage Management Plan for SUAS. 15th July 2020. Unpublished report for SUAS EIP.

[2] Wilson, F. (2020). Report for Screening for Appropriate Assessment for a Commonage Management Plan at Slievemweel, Askanagap, Co. Wicklow in accordance with the requirements of Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive. 7th September 2020. Unpublished report for SUAS EIP.

Year 2 (2021)

1. Use a bracken bruiser in area 5 and area 6, where it is accessible by a quad. Note-Care must be taken when using quad on rough or steep ground and obstacles should be marked in advance or by somebody walking in front of the quad. To be done in early-June and again in mid-August.
2. Cut the remaining Sitka spruce saplings & trees in area 2.
3. Individual or small clumps of gorse in area 5 may be control burned. This shall only be done during the legal burning period and shall be properly controlled as directed by the project manager. The project manager shall provide training, required equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE), and relevant notifications and permit applications shall be made in advance.
4. Areas of bracken that are inaccessible by bracken bruiser may be controlled by spraying. This shall be done using knapsack sprayers with Asulox herbicide and concentrated in areas when the bracken is spreading into heath habitat. A max of 1ha to be done in any one year.
5. Consider planting some broadleaf trees in area 16. These shall be native trees of local provenance, and details of planting plan shall be provided by ecologist/project manager.

Year 3 (2022)

1. To be reviewed at the end of Year 2

Shepherding

Average time per shepherding: 3 Hours

No of times sheep are to be shepherded: 2-3 Times per week from 1st April to 31st December

Identified objective of the shepherding;

- Stock to be encouraged into areas 1, 4 & 13, to get them to graze these areas.
- Monitor stock health, particularly 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 more sheep grazing the commonage in the Jan/Feb and April/May period.
- Use the feed buckets to move grazing pressure away from the grass areas to overgrown areas in Jan/Feb period.

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 September 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

There was no consensus by the commonage owners on the establishment of gully woodland along the two watercourses in the commonage so this measure was not conducted.

3.2 Gorse Removal

Gorse removal was conducted initially manually with a chainsaw in Area 14, whilst a machine flailed the gorse in Area 15. These areas are visible on **Figure 1** below.

Plate 1. Gorse removal in Area 14 has resulted in good recovery of acid grassland.

The acid grassland beneath is beginning to recover but there is a lot of gorse regeneration.

Plate 2. Gorse removal in Area 14.

Plate 3. Regeneration of tormentil, grass and cleavers below flailed areas of gorse.

3.3 Bracken Control

Bracken control was implemented in 2021 using both a bracken bruiser and a trial was completed of using glyphosate with a weed wiper. The weed wiper and the glyphosate caused quite a level of

collateral damage in the grass underneath. It probably varies, but anything from 20-30% and in some cases even more. But the grass is starting to recover so it's not a total disaster, but the impact is very obvious compared to the Asuolox which takes more time to work.

Plate 4. Bracken control with the bracken bruiser.

Plate 5. Bracken control using glyphosate applied with the weed wiper.

Plate 6. Bracken control using the bruiser in Area 5.

Plate 7. Bracken control using the bruiser in Area 5.

3.4 Burnt Areas

The areas of hillside and the ridge that were previously burnt were only slowly beginning to revegetate in 2020 when they were dominated by a low sward of ling heather of uniform height. In some parts both hare's tail and common cotton grass are beginning to get established alongside purple moor grass but cross leaved heath and *Sphagnum* moss cover remains very rare. There is occasional growth of bilberry but this is also sparse. It was recommended in 2020 that there must be no further burning on the commonage.

The commonage was burnt on 28th February 2021. The extent of the burn can be seen on the google earth imagery below in **Figure 1**. The areas of gorse clearing are also clear (indictaed by the red arrows).

Figure 1. Slievemweel commonage July 2021.

On the burnt areas there is a lot of green-ribbed sedge, heath rush and deergrass becoming established following the burn. These species are mostly unpalatable to sheep. There is good recovery of ling heather, there is no cross-leaved heath and no bog asphodel. In some places there is some small areas of sphagnum moss still extant, but there are large areas just with Acrocarpus mosses.

Some parts were more severely burnt than others. There is also a bit of bilberry recovering in the odd place but in general the hillside here has been damaged and the recovery of the habitat further set back. There is also some glaucous sedge.

There are areas of bare peat which are now vulnerable to erosion.

Plate 8. Regrowth following burning on the slopes – dominated by Purple moor grass, green ribbed sedge, mat grass, heath rush and deer grass. These are mostly unpalatable to sheep.

Plate 9. Bare peat surrounding regenerating ling heather.

Plate 10. Sparse regeneration on the ridge.

Plate 11. Burnt gorse in Area 3.

3.5 Acid Grassland Habitats

The areas of acid grassland within the commonage are overgrazed and stocking rates need to be reviewed and likely reduced.

3.6 Management for 2022

A review of the works which were proposed for 2021 in the plan, coupled with the outcomes from the 2021 walkover was conducted. Items highlighted in red have not been completed. This has informed the proposed works for 2022.

2020

Cut back self-seeded Sitka spruce trees in Area 2

Use a bracken bruiser in area 5 and area 6, where it is accessible by a quad. Note-Care must be taken when using quad on rough or steep ground and obstacles should be marked in advance or by somebody walking in front of the quad. To be done in early-June and again in mid-August.

Cut gorse bushes in Area 14 with a tractor mounted mulcher. Large stones/rocks should be identified for contractor to prevent damage to machine. Cut gorse in Area 3 if accessible by tractor, but do not cut the broadleaf trees growing there. Other areas of gorse that are easily accessible by tractor in areas on the south side of the commonage may also be mulched.

Individual or small clumps of gorse in area 5 may be control burned. This shall only be done during the legal burning period and shall be properly controlled as directed by the project manager. The project manager shall provide training, required equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE), and relevant notifications and permit applications shall be made in advance.

Works in red were not completed

2021

Use a bracken bruiser in Area 5 and Area 6, where it is accessible by a quad.

Note: Care must be taken when using quad on rough or steep ground and obstacles should be marked in advance or by somebody walking in front of the quad. To be done in early-June and again in mid-August.

Cut gorse bushes in Area 14 with a tractor mounted mulcher to allow better access through the hill. Retain areas of gorse surrounding the existing trees here to protect them from gazing animals.

Areas of bracken that are inaccessible by bracken bruiser may be controlled by spraying. This shall be done using knapsack sprayers with Asulox herbicide and concentrated in areas where the bracken is spreading into heath habitat such as Area 13. A max of 2ha to be done in any one year.

Individual or small clumps of gorse in Area 5 may be cut.

Plant at least 100 native broadleaf trees in Area 16 and along the watercourse in the gully on the east side of the commonage. These shall be native trees of local provenance, and details of planting plan shall be provided by ecologist/project manager.

Use the feed buckets to move grazing pressure away from the grass areas to overgrown areas in Jan/Feb period.

Review stocking rates on the hill.

4. Appendix 1. Maps & Management Recommendations

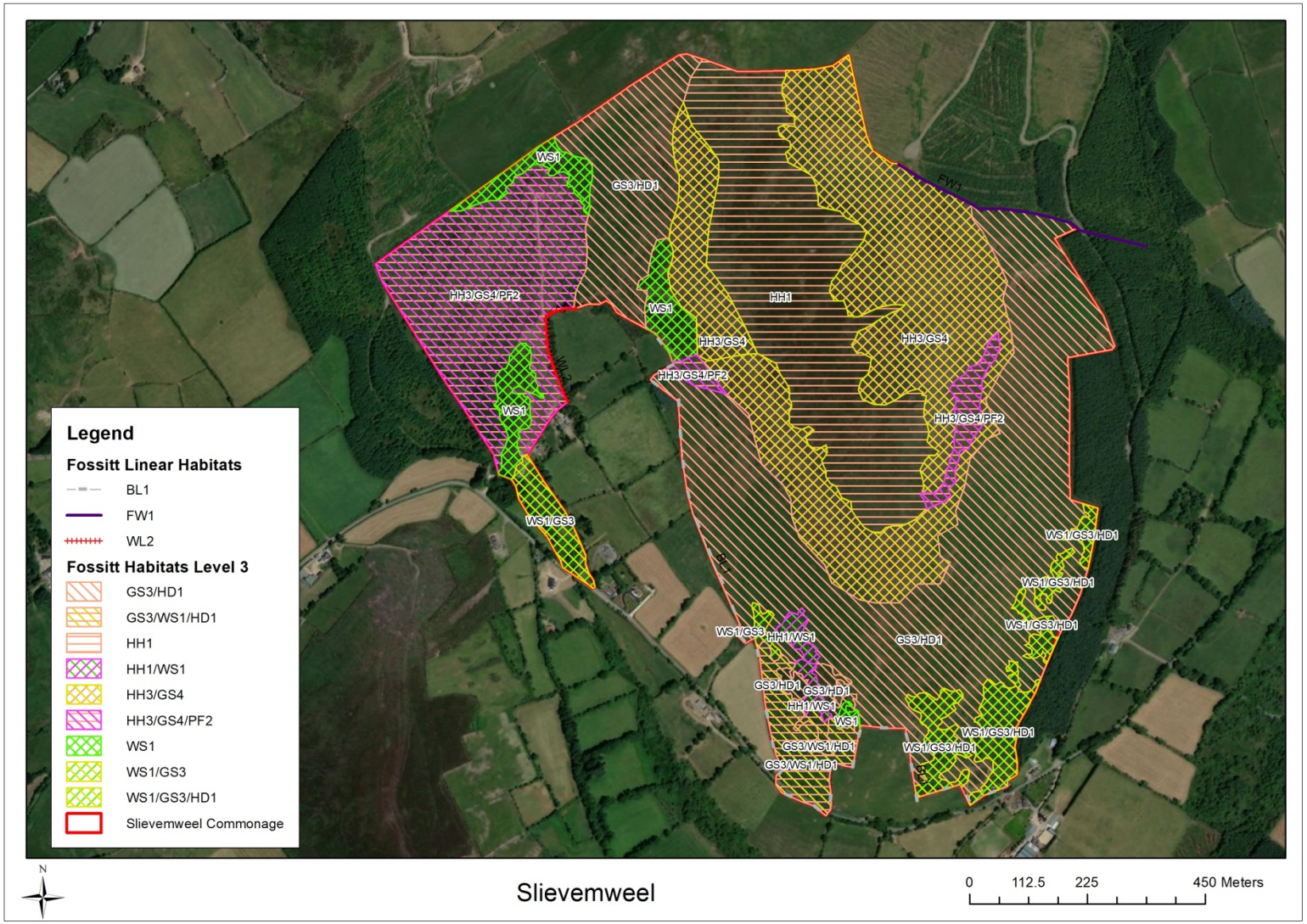

Figure 1. Habitats mapped to Level Three (Fossitt, 2000) within the Slievemweel commonage.

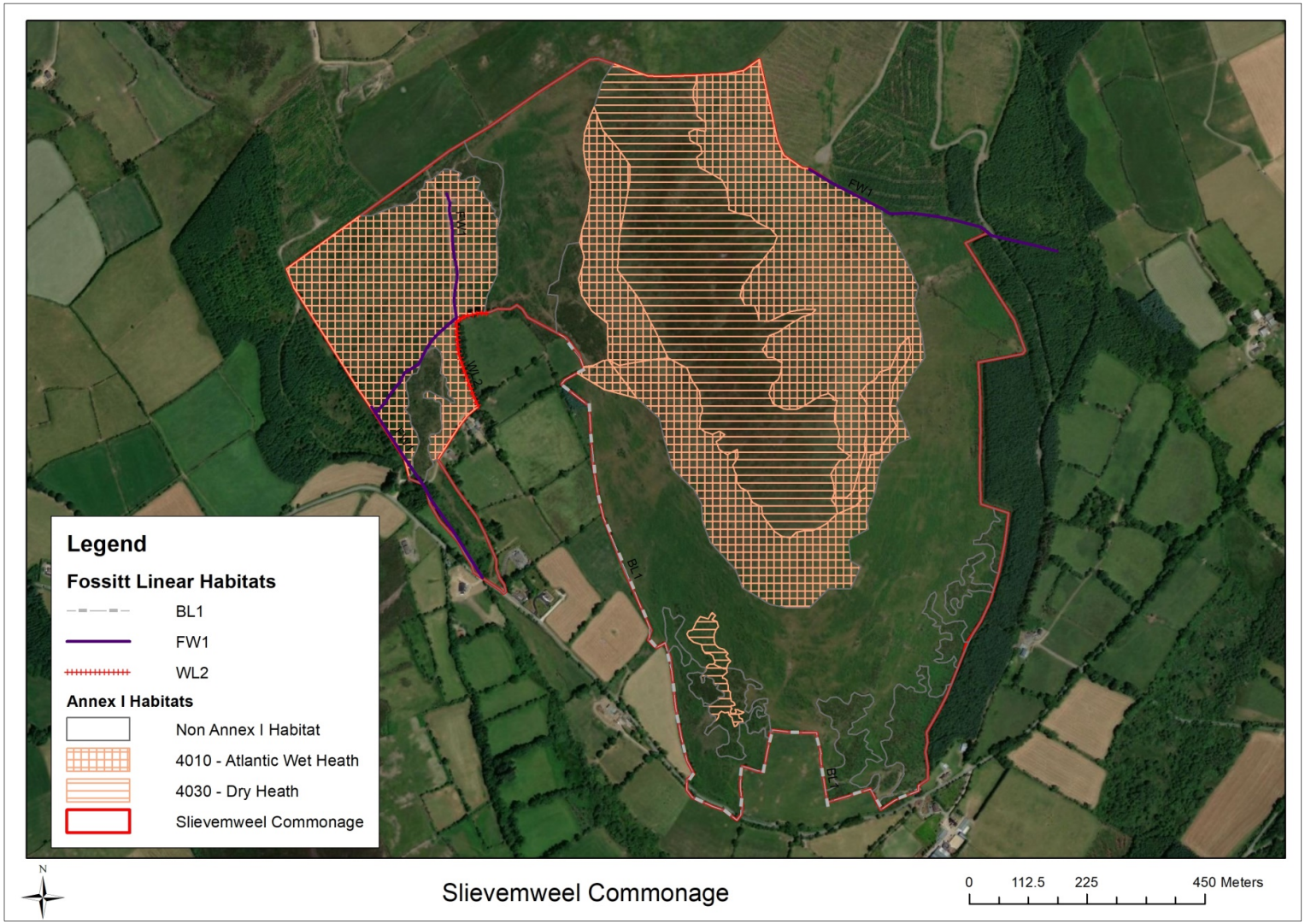

Figure 2. Habitats mapped according to their correspondence with Annex I habitats within the Slievemweel commonage.

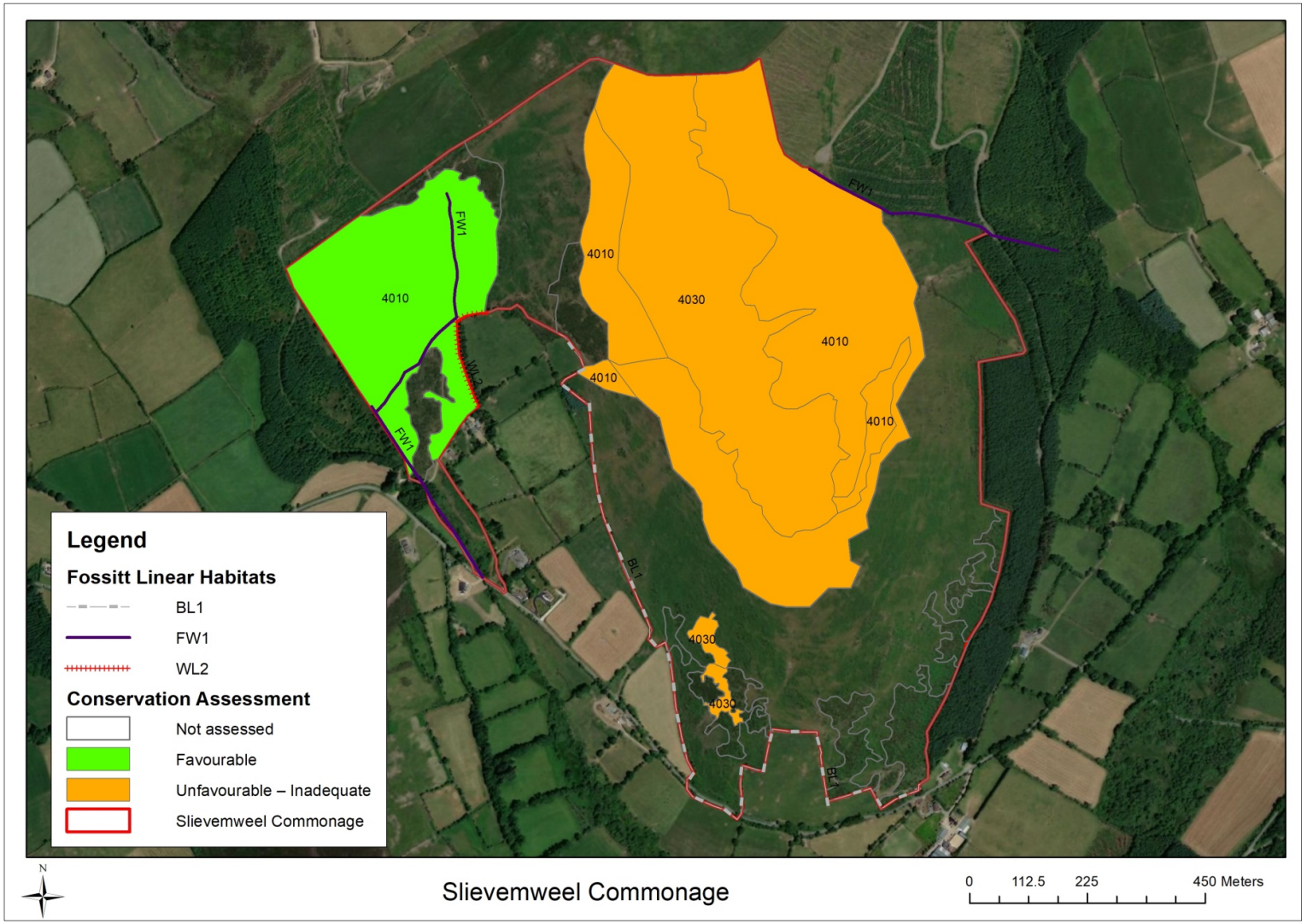

Figure 3. Habitat Condition Assessment for Slievemweel Commonage.

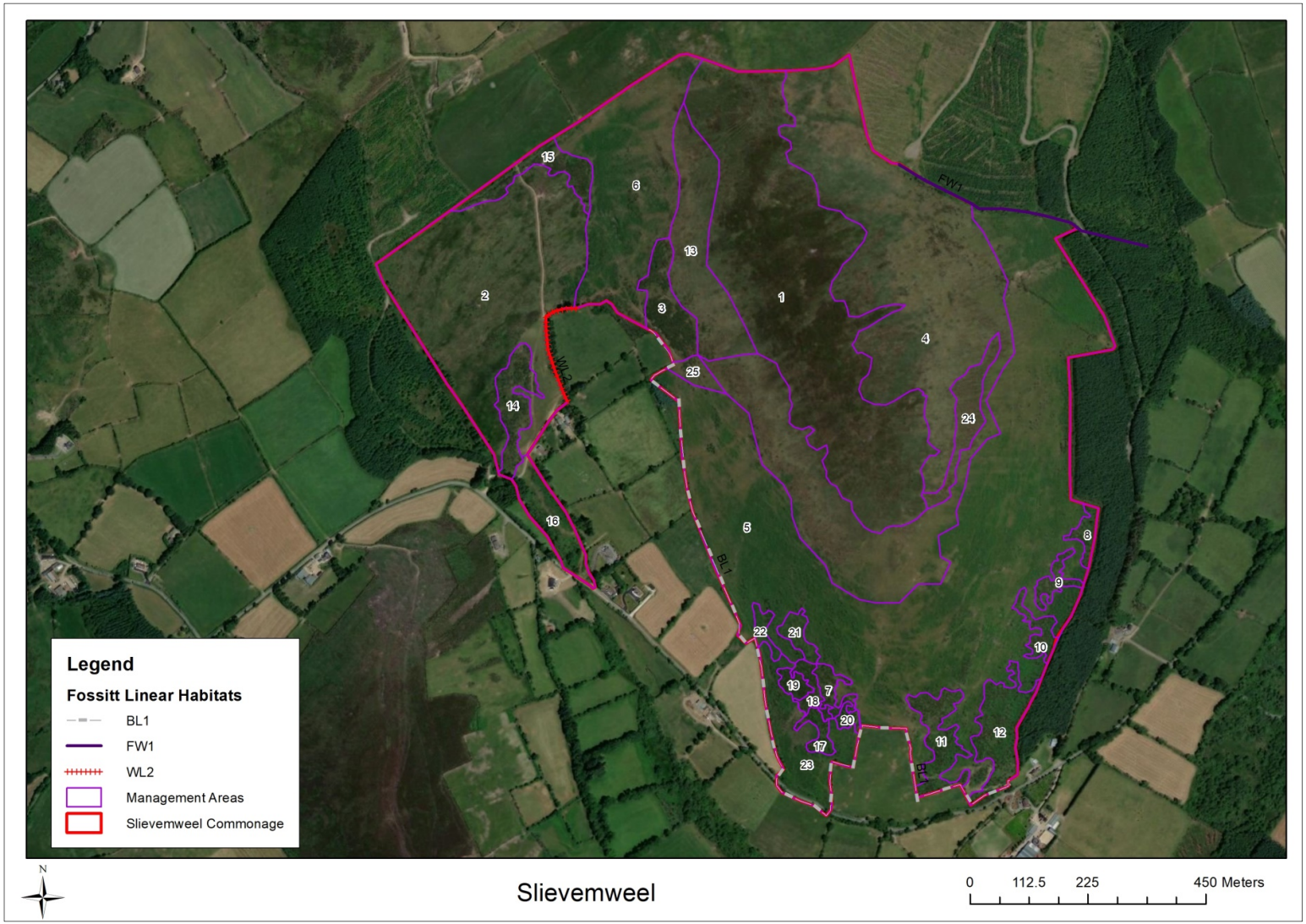

Figure 4. Management measures for Slievemweel.

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

Management Area	Fossitt Habitat Code	Habitat Description	Area (m2)	Management Measure
1	HH1	Dry heath	176803	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill
2	HH3/GS4/PF2	Wet heath/wet grassland/flush	121872	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill Establishment of native woodland along the watercourse
3	WS1	Gorse scrub	13670	This area has some emergent woodland developing. This should be retained and enhanced
4	HH3/GS4	Wet heath/wet grassland	226391	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill Establishment of native woodland along the watercourse
5	GS3/HD1	Acid grassland/dense bracken	311372	Bracken control Shepherding of stock on the hill Establishment of native woodland along the watercourse
6	GS3/HD1	Acid grassland/dense bracken	72213	Bracken control Shepherding of stock on the hill
7	GS3/HD1	Acid grassland/dense bracken	3853	Bracken control Shepherding of stock on the hill
8	WS1/GS3/HD1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	3183	Bracken control Shepherding of stock on the hill
9	WS1/GS3/HD1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	3488	Bracken control Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
10	WS1/GS3/HD1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	4325	Bracken control Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
11	WS1/GS3/HD1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	11833	Bracken control Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
12	WS1/GS3/HD1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	15857	Bracken control Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
13	HH3/GS4	Wet heath/wet grassland	36442	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill
14	WS1	Gorse scrub	11555	Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
15	WS1	Gorse scrub	11064	Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
16	WS1/GS3	Gorse scrub/acid grassland	13006	Could consider establishment of native woodland

Management Area	Fossitt Habitat Code	Habitat Description	Area (m2)	Management Measure
17	GS3/WS1/HD1	Acid grassland/gorse/dense bracken	2994	Bracken control Gorse control?
18	HH1/WS1	Autumn gorse scrub	3438	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill
19	GS3/HD1	Acid grassland/dense bracken	2444	Bracken control
20	WS1	Gorse scrub/acid grassland	1600	Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
21	HH1/WS1	Autumn gorse scrub	3626	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill
22	WS1/GS3	Gorse scrub/acid grassland/bracken	2361	Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
23	GS3/WS1/HD1	Acid grassland/gorse/dense bracken	24484	Bracken control Gorse control/could consider establishment of native woodland
24	HH3/GS4/PF2	Wet heath/wet grassland/flush	11192	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill
25	HH3/GS4/PF2	Wet heath/wet grassland/flush	3587	No further burning Shepherding of stock on the hill