

Castlewellan Blackface Sheep Breeders

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Co Down.
BT33 0LA
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Castlewellan Blackface Sheep Breeders is a group of 60 plus members based in the Mourne and Slieve Croob areas of County Down and we welcome the opportunity to respond to this very important consultation on the future support arrangements for the Northern Ireland's Less Favoured Areas.

The LFA scheme is part of the Northern Ireland (NI) Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013 (Axis 2) and is legislated under EU Council Regulation 1698/2005 paragraph 33 which within it states; 'Natural handicap payments should contribute, through continued use of agricultural land, to maintaining the countryside as well as maintaining and promoting sustainable farming systems'.

The Current Scheme main objectives are

- I. To contribute to the continuation of farming in the LFA and thus, to the maintenance of a viable rural community
- II. To contribute towards the maintenance of the countryside
- III. To promote the everyday use of good environmental practices complementary to maintaining sustainable farming
- IV. To secure the future existence of semi-natural habitats and traditional landscapes by ensuring the continuance of sustainable agriculture activity which would otherwise not be guaranteed.
- V. To prevent land abandonment particularly in LFA areas.

We fully support option 4

Our members believe that full payment on common grazing is a must as these areas must be managed in the same way as owned land or conacre. We also believe that payment should only be made to active farmers ie those farmers who are working to enhance their farms, environmentally or by suitable stock improvement.

The current minimum area farmed should be raised from 3ha, possibly to 6ha. Someone farming less than this is in reality a hobby farmer, and the amount of money being received is of no real importance to them.

There is no justification for the current policy of discriminating against sheep farmers by paying a higher rate to those farmers with more than 25% of their livestock as suckler

cows. On many of the poorest hills where the land is often dry heath and high altitude grazing, cattle production is simply not sustainable, these farmers have no option to sheep rearing, and these are often the farms with the most to offer from either a landscape or an environmental point of view, yet they are disadvantaged in favour of suckler producers in better areas. Sheep farmers have been poorly served by both the Agenda 2000 deal, and the Single Farm Payment Scheme – we would hope for more fairness this time.

There needs to be more research into the role of traditional breeds in hill land management. Aware of ongoing work by AFBI comparing grazing habits of Scottish Blackface and Swaledale ewes on hill land with that of crossbreds. This is very important work, and the preservation of traditional breeds is vital. In the sheep industry at the moment, easier care is in vogue, yet with the drain of hill breeds, which are known for their hardiness and maternal traits, from the uplands, we are in danger of losing a genetic resource which could be useful to the whole industry in the future. Also we do not want to lose the traditional specialist skills associated with this type of hill farming.

We would propose the following payment rates.

- Two payment rates
 - i. 0 – 100 ha @ £62.50/ha and no mixed grazing bonus.
 - ii. More than 100 ha @ £50/ha and no mixed grazing bonus.

We believe that the current requirement for minimum stocking density should remain as is for breeding sheep and suckler cows.

John Brennan
Secretary