

Date: Tuesday, 26 May 2009

## FOA Policy Development Branch, DARD

**RE: Review of Support Arrangements for Less Favoured Areas in Northern Ireland – response from Conservations Designations and Protection (CDP), Natural Heritage, NIEA.**

### To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this review of LFA support arrangements. Conservation Designations and Protection (CDP), Natural Heritage (NH) Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is the unit tasked with the designation of areas of national and international high biodiversity value, and with ensuring that appropriate mechanisms are in place for their subsequent management.

The following response is based on the consultation questions highlighted in the report.

- 1. Are you content that all of the relevant issues have been captured and adequately explored?** – NIEA would like to remind DARD Policy Branch of their responsibilities under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995. As a Competent Authority under the above legislation, DARD is required to ensure that any plan or project can only be undertaken where it can be demonstrated beyond reasonable scientific doubt that the proposed works are unlikely to have a significant impact on any Natura 2000 site selection feature. A properly considered Article 6 Assessment is a decision making tool that will assist the Competent Authority in arriving at a robust and defensible conclusion that can be used to inform future actions, ensuring that the Natura 2000 site selection features are protected from any significant adverse impact.
- 2. Are you content with the conclusions that have been reached within the evidence chapters?** – Yes
- 3. Do you agree with Option 1 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should not be reallocated to other rural development measures?** – No. NIEA would not support this option as we believe it may lead to abandonment in the uplands. Extensive farming is a very important management tool for the delivery of biodiversity and protected landscape goals and therefore its continued existence is vital.
- 4. Do you agree with Option 2 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should be reallocated entirely to Axis 1 and Axis 3 measures of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme?** - No. NIEA would not support this option as we believe it may lead to abandonment in the uplands. Extensive farming is a very important management tool for the delivery of biodiversity and protected landscape goals and therefore its continued existence is vital.

5. **Do you agree with Option 3 that there should be no future LFACA Scheme and that the funds released should be reallocated entirely to the agri-environment programme?** NIEA can see the merits of this type approach. NIEA works closely with Countryside Management Branch on the application of NICMS on lands within and adjacent to designated sites (ASSIs, SACs, SPAs and RAMSAR sites). We would support this Option if monies were redirected through existing schemes with ring fencing for management of designated sites. However, given the voluntary nature of the scheme, NIEA has concerns that some areas not in receipt of agri-environment payments within designated sites and other farmed areas of high natural and scenic value may not be agriculturally sustainable. Without LFA support it is likely that a valuable management tool for at least maintaining biodiversity in the countryside would be lost.
6. **Do you agree with Option 4 that there should be a future LFACA Scheme?**  
Yes.
- Do you agree with the broad outline for such a Scheme that has been given and the reasons for this?** Yes
  - Do you agree that the focus of future of support should be the SDA (or any future designated LFA)?** Yes, to some degree. We would like to see a higher tier focused on the suite of designated sites and areas of high landscape and nature conservation value. This HNV tier would attract a higher payment reflecting the extra delivery requirements and costs for these environmental public goods and associated services.
  - Do you agree that applicants to the Scheme should farm at least 10 ha of land in total (of which at least 3 ha must be in the SDA)?** We believe that there should be no minimum to entry requirement to the new upper tier thus encompassing smaller land owners who could continue to deliver environmental public goods and services.
  - What are your views on the range of farm enterprises that would make a farm eligible for support?** All farm enterprises that comply with their statutory environmental duties and provide appropriate management of designated sites should be considered for support.
  - What are your views on the use of minimum and maximum stocking densities?** Maximum and minimum stocking rates are a vital tool in the appropriate management of valuable habitats. Portions of land receiving the new HNV tier should be given minimum and maximum stocking rates based on the needs of the broad habitat types.
  - What are your views on the use of a possible environmental option within an LFA support scheme? What sort of environmental issues could usefully be addressed by such a mechanism?** See above.
7. **Are there any equality issues that you would like to raise that have not been addressed adequately?** No.
8. **Are there any issues relating to rural proofing that you would like to raise that have not been addressed adequately?** No
9. **Are there any other issues you would like to draw our attention to in the context of this review?** Please see note at the start of this statement.

We would wish to engage with DARD in the detailed discussions of any new scheme, insofar as these impact on the environment. If you require further clarification, please contact me.

James Warnock CDP, NIEA.