

NBA (NI region) response to review of support arrangements for Less Favoured Areas in Northern Ireland

The council of NBA (NI region) representing members throughout the province has met to discuss this review and we firstly would like to compliment the minister, and her staff in Policy Development Branch for a very comprehensive and informative document. We would also like to thank Norman Fulton and Rosemary Agnew for all their advice and assistance in giving us a greater insight into the review.

As the report states 70% of the total utilised agricultural area in NI is classified as Less Favoured, amounting to 777,900ha of which 5% (39,849ha) is classified as common land – land on which the right to graze animals is shared.

Interestingly 70% of all farm businesses are within the LFA, although characterised by 'small' holdings (57% of all farm holdings) they still represent a high % of the NI farming population, creating employment for many farming families.

Again delving further into the statistics you see that in 2007, 70% of all NI beef and sheep farms were concentrated within the LFA, and 77% of all beef cows and 80% of the breeding ewes were in the LFA.

These farmers and their stock are all vital, if not essential to the management of the Less Favoured Areas.

The Less Favoured areas, both the SDA and DA classifications, no matter if it is the high Mourne, the Glens of Antrim or the shores of Lough Erne, are all of high environmental value with important habitats and species rich areas. They support grazing livestock which in turn are essential if the areas are to remain 'environmentally friendly'. They also provide pleasure to the rural dweller, tourists, hill walkers environmentalists etc etc.

Many of the DA areas are part of old transhumance systems which are part and parcel of the upland management systems put in place by our forefathers many centuries ago, so have a high cultural significance today.

The question is how can these areas be managed to deliver the right type of bio-diversity? The answer is simple and is through the system of mixed grazing with the right type or breed of livestock and the correct mix of suckler cows and sheep. Here there needs to be proper research carried out as the grazing management progresses in order to achieve the bio-diversity goals and thereby create sustainable grazing systems.

If farmers are expected to manage these landscapes for the *public good* then the public *must* be prepared to pay for it! The market certainly is not able to, and if the landscapes as we know them are to be maintained and not abandoned then support must be found.

The facts show that with decoupling and poor market returns exaggerated with high overhead costs, farming within the LFA is in the decline – the situation changes from a problem of overgrazing to one of under grazing and eventually abandonment. Abandonment is already apparent in many LFA areas within NI and without additional funding will rapidly increase.

Hill breeds of cattle and sheep which are on the LFAs need encouragement if they are to remain within the LFA. Presently Irish Moiled cattle are the only traditional breed being supported within the NICMS and ONLY as a measure to increase their numbers as they are on the Rare Breed Survival Trust endangered species list.

The NBA suggests that if the landscape is not to deteriorate further then more of the traditional breeds should be financially assisted. When you compare the NICMS with the English Rural Stewardship Scheme, there was encouragement to keep traditional British breeds and their crossbreeds on the hills even if a continental bull is used to provide calves, sold as weanlings at the autumn suckler sales for the lowland farmers to finish.

We also feel that 'active' farmers should be rewarded for 'managing' the LFA with additional payments for environmental issues e.g., mixed grazing supplement, landscape improvements – stone wall building, drainage, roadway access etc.

From the public or the tax payer's point of view they will want to see "value for money" and those who receive any financial allowances must show they have earned it and be the 'right' people receiving it.

We see that within the SFP, Article 68 could be used to increase the financial support for hill beef and sheep farmers. Although we are against a system of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" we feel the elements of modulation could be directed towards animal improvement schemes and/or to improve the standards of traditional breeds. Modulation must be used correctly and therefore needs further debate.

DARD or Afbi needs to be encouraged into taking a lead in 'research' on different grazing management systems within the LFAs

The NBA doesn't want to see an exodus of both livestock and people from the hills. The beef industry – keeping suckler cows on the hills to produce suckler calves for others to finish, as well as the sheep industry – the basis of any stratified sheep production system needs support before these vital sectors of the agricultural industry are lost and our hills abandoned and changed forever.

Therefore the NBA after considering the 4 options have decided that Option 4 will best suit the LFA, but with the following restraints/additions:

- No reduction in the Less Favoured Area, and definitely not the loss of the DA classification. The total LFA (SDA and DA) to remain.
- Additional funding for mixed grazing systems. DARD to lead research in mixed grazing systems for the LFA.
- Additional funding for traditional breeds

- Only paid to active farmers who are fulfilling the environmental codes/requirements
- Common land to be given the same status as SDA qualifying land provided it is properly managed and controlled by the trustees.

The NBA also considered other issues - raising of the minimum eligible size to 10 hectares, increasing the minimum stocking density from 0.2 LU/ha and having a maximum limit but felt that this would be penalising a large number of farm holdings in the LFA and should therefore be left unchanged.

One issue that was worrying was the importance of conacre for many farm businesses. Within these areas the tenant needs encouragement to take this land to avoid further land abandonment, but the ongoing issues of inheritance tax, no NICMS schemes etc are worrying.

We also see merit in a tiered or degressive system of payment but within NI where there is a high prevalence of small holdings this may not be an option. We certainly do not want to see payments going from DA recipients for distribution to SDA farmers.

Basically funding must encourage farmers to manage the landscape they live in so it is 'environmentally friendly' for themselves and of benefit to everyone. In reality there needs to be a workable solution for "active farmers" in the LFAs who use their payments to benefit the area both environmentally and socially.