

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF LFA SUPPORT

1. LFA support is a vital tool to help maintain the countryside and to maintain and promote sustainable farming systems through the continued use of agricultural land by generations of farmers who have shaped the present countryside and who have the skills to maintain and enhance it in the future.
2. Important to support active farmers and the level of support must be adequate
3. Terminology needs to be changed there is no commonage in NI. The majority of the Mourne Mountains are trust estates with some shareholder mountains. Use of the mountains is an integral part of farming in the LFA. The trustees on each mountain manage the area on their estate and are responsible for fencing, maintenance and grazing control and stocking densities.
4. Proposed stepped decrease in support at 40 ha would be very detrimental to the Mournes and would have a negative impact on grazing on the mountains. Farming on the mountains needs higher payments to compensate for additional costs incurred (e.g. louping ill vaccination, tick control, shepherding etc) and income forgone related to the natural handicap of the mountains. Without higher payment on the mountains sheep numbers will decrease. If sheep flocks are not grazed on the mountains on a regular basis it becomes very difficult to re-establish grazing on the area. An example of this is already evident on a Mourne mountain which was compulsory destocked for a number of years.

We propose that the first tier of support on mountain land should be at 60ha. This land can be easily distinguished from farmland by information held by DARD from SFP forms.

Content with 40 ha on farmland

5. Land taken in conacre is generally not as well managed and such land is generally not improved. Land leased for a longer period is generally better maintained. The LFA payment on land should therefore reflect this – with one example, land taken in conacre attracting only half the payment that land on a longer term lease e.g. 5+ years would attract.
6. Mixed grazing supplement can be seen as discriminatory against farmers with a small area of land as it may not be practical to keep both cows and sheep on this area. It is important that all farmers are encouraged to continue farming. Mixed grazing supplement can be seen as discriminatory against larger upland sheep farmers where land is poorer, more inaccessible, more difficult to manage and not suitable or practical for cows. Larger trust estates are not suitable for grazing cattle as there are issues relating to bio security, safety and environmental management issues where there are a large number of different graziers.
7. Higher payment regime should be implemented sooner rather than later, and certainly before 2014 as the present economics of LFA farming clearly show.

8. Young farmers need to be encouraged to continue to farm in the LFA as then knowledge and skills to farm in the LFA must be passed from one generation to the next. A pension scheme for older farmers may be one useful tool. Financial incentives aimed at young LFA farmers may be another useful tool.
9. All LFA payments need to be inflation proofed. In addition, decreased SFP payments due to modulation, etc will counteract and financial benefit obtained from increased LFA payments due.
10. Land abandonment in the LFA will be a massive issue if Bluetongue is allowed in to the country as the economic impact on farmers may force many out of business. The skills held by these LFA farmers would be lost. DARD needs to continue to work on this issue.
11. Trust Estates needs CMS scheme tailored to individual mountains. Trustees have been managing the land for years and have a greater understanding of what is required.
12. CMS needs reviewed – needs a more common sense approach.
13. The creation of a National Park will cause land abandonment – farmers consider that there is too much bureaucracy, too many inspections and too many people telling the farmer what to do.
14. Farmers would prefer to receive adequate returns from the market place to provide a reasonable income for their work plus sufficient funds to reinvest in their farm business. If LFA farmers are unable to obtain sufficient income agricultural activity in the LFA will greatly reduce with serious environmental consequences. The proposed LFA payment will only achieve their objectives if there is also a significant rise in farm gate process to ensure that long-term viability of farm business.
15. Do not agree that the applicants should farm at least 10Ha. The present 3Ha minimum should be maintained as small farmers are as capable of maintaining the land. The small farmers also make substantial use of the mountain and are as valuable to land management as the large farmers.