

Countryside Management Newsletter

Winter 2008/09

Rural Development Programme

Growing Opportunities
Together

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This newsletter and many
other Countryside
Management
publications are available
at www.dardni.gov.uk and
www.ruralni.gov.uk.

Farm Visits Completed

Countryside Management Branch (CMB) staff have completed farm visits for 1,300 applicants to the new N Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) and the 100 applicants to the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS).

Both of these schemes are integral parts of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007 - 2013.

This programme is part-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) with co-funding provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Both schemes will play an important role in delivery of Axis 2 of the RDP which aims to, 'improve the environment and the countryside through land management'.



- Robert Campbell of Plumbridge with Peter McCormack, Countryside Management Branch, DARD on a farm audit.

Recent Applicant to NICMS

Robert Campbell and his family have farmed the same land near Plumbridge for generations.

He remembers as a boy cutting peat by hand from a bog next to the farm house.

Now he is applying to NICMS to maintain heathland and other habitats on his farm.

Peter McCormack from Countryside Management Branch visited the farm in November to carry out the farm visit and suggest management options to improve biodiversity, protect water quality and enhance the landscape.

Farm Visits Completed

Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS)

There was tremendous interest in NICMS with around 4,500 applications received. With such a large number of applications and budgetary constraints, applications had to be prioritised to maximise the benefit to the environment.

Around 1,300 applications with designated land were selected for farm audits and further

processing. The article titled 'Targeting important environmental sites' explains how applications were prioritised.

Remaining applicants will be automatically re-submitted for the next application period which is anticipated to be early summer 2009.

Going Organic



• Roy Lyttle beside his organic leek crop.

The Organic Farming Scheme has been set up to encourage farmers to convert to organic farming, to meet the demand for organic food and benefit the environment. It is an element of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, funded under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

Organic farming does not use artificial fertilisers or synthetic pesticides. It emphasises the role of crop rotation in maintaining soil fertility and reducing pest and disease problems. Fertility is built up using crops such as clover, and natural fertilisers such as animal manures.

Organic farming also helps the environment by actively managing the land in a way that benefits biodiversity.

Roy Lyttle from Loughries, Co. Down began conversion to an organic system in 2000. He selected some of his fields for growing organic vegetables and contacted an approved Organic

Certification body for help. He usually produces about eight or nine hectares of organic vegetables each year. These include leeks, potatoes, and five varieties of cabbage. About 80% of the organic produce goes to a supermarket, the rest to local shops and box schemes.

The Organic Farming Scheme booklet can also be downloaded from the RuralNI site, www.ruralni.gov.uk

Application periods for 2009 will be announced in the press.

If you are considering converting to organic farming in the future you should contact CAFRE's organic advisers on 028 9442 6765.



Organic Farming Scheme

Just over 100 applications were received for the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). Countryside Management staff have visited each farm and discussed the Scheme with farmers. It is anticipated that the OFS will open again for applications in early summer 2009.

Targeting Important Environmental Sites

Protecting and improving biodiversity is one of the main aims of the new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS).

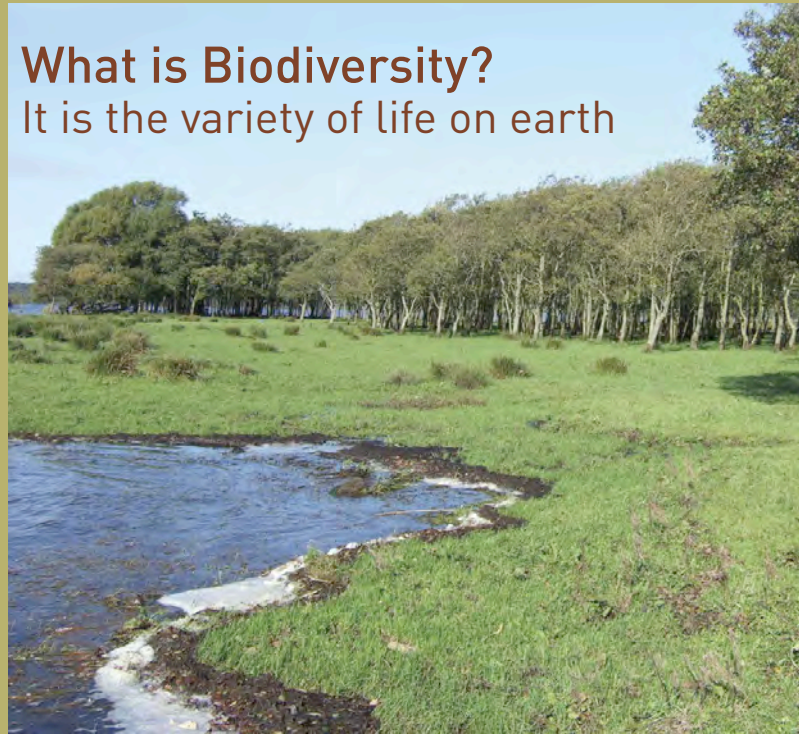
Within the EU, the most important areas for biodiversity are known as Natura 2000 sites. These sites have been designated with special status in NI by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). These are called Areas of Special Scientific Interest, and include areas for important plants, animals and birds. All of these sites are recorded on the DARD mapping system and can be identified for each individual business without the need for a farm visit.

In order to ensure that these special sites are carefully managed, they have been given a high priority within NICMS. Therefore, applications from farmers within these designated sites were given the first opportunity to enter the Scheme. This priority entry was agreed with the Environmental Sub-Group of the NI Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee who have responsibility to oversee all aspects of the European funding through the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

On this basis, and related to budgetary constraints, around 1,300 applicants from a total of 4,500 will be offered the opportunity to join NICMS this year.

Those who were unsuccessful this year will have their application automatically re-submitted next year, unless they tell us they do not wish to re-apply.

What is Biodiversity? It is the variety of life on earth



- Lough Neagh is a designated site of local, European and international importance

Priority Species and Habitats

Protecting the Marsh Fritillary



- Marsh Fritillary - courtesy of Butterfly Conservation



- Devil's bit scabious - Marsh Fritillary habitat courtesy of Bobby Hamill NIEA

The marsh fritillary butterfly is a priority species found in our countryside. Priority species and habitats have published action plans that aim to prevent their decline and loss by 2016. The Marsh Fritillary is rare and its range has declined by 60% in the last 150 years throughout the British Isles. The marsh fritillary requires unimproved grasslands with an abundance of devil's bit scabious for its caterpillars to feed on.

Marsh fritillary sites in NI are of high importance at both Irish and European level. Farmers in DARD agri-environment schemes can put in place suitable management for the long-term benefit of the marsh fritillary butterfly.

If you have seen marsh fritillary butterflies over the summer or have its food plant the devil's bit scabious growing on your farm please contact your local CMB staff now so that we can advise on suitable management for summer 2009.

Priority Species and Habitats

- The chough has a distinctive red beak and legs. Photo courtesy of RSPB



Chasing Chough

With only one pair nesting on the north coast, the chough is our rarest breeding bird. It differs from other members of the crow family in that it is coastal, nesting on cliffs and feeding on cliff slopes and short, semi-improved grasslands within two miles of its nest site.

In the late 1990s an option was introduced to the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme. This option encourages management of coastal farmland as feeding habitat for the chough. The option was taken up by several scheme participants in the Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin ESA.

It has been successful in keeping a single pair of choughs nesting on the north coast each year, and most recently on Rathlin.

Although the pair produced young in most years, numbers of chough have

not increased. In August each year choughs gather together to overwinter in flocks. Such a flock has been seen in Inishowen, Co. Donegal. However, the young birds have not returned to the Antrim coastline when they reach breeding age.

The good news is that this year may be the exception. RSPB colour-ringed the four young birds from Rathlin to help identify them. Although they left the island in early August with the adults, they returned in late September. This is the first time since 1997 that six chough have been seen on our north coast.

By continuing to manage the land for the chough under agri-environment schemes, it is hoped that the young birds will stay on the north coast until they reach breeding age.

The Irish Hare



• Photo courtesy of Mervyn Guthrie

The Irish hare is a much loved mammal of myth and legend. It has been part of our countryside for many thousands of years. A native mammal, it was widespread and common throughout the country up until the early 1900s. Since then their numbers have been generally declining. The reasons for this are varied and complicated but include agricultural intensification, habitat loss and increased use of farm machinery.

The ideal habitat for the hare is a mixed grass sward which provides food and cover. Tall vegetation provides peaceful lie-up areas that are free from disturbance particularly during the breeding season.

Existing Agri-environment Scheme members can encourage the Irish hare by:

- retaining all farmland habitats;
- managing hedges so that they are wide at the bottom - cut into an 'A'shape and allowing a grass margin to develop along the field boundary;
- keeping field operations to a minimum during the spring and early summer;
- leaving a grass margin around the field or leaving the field corners uncut;
- controlling rushes by cutting/topping between 15 July and 15 March. Cut fields in rotation and always leaving some rushes uncut.

New NICMS members can further encourage the Irish hare by:

- selecting the delayed cutting and grazing option. Delaying cutting of silage and hay until 1 July reduces disturbance during the breeding season;
- selecting the grassland low input option. This will increase the biodiversity of grassland habitat, and reduces disturbance in the spring.

Agri-Environment Training

by George Mathers, Agri-Environment Training Manager, Greenmount Campus, CAFRE

Farmers in existing agri-environment schemes and farmers who join NICMS must take part in CAFRE training workshops. These consist of three sessions covering Field Boundary Management, Cross-Compliance and Dealing with Farm Wastes.

Field Boundary Management

An on-farm workshop that demonstrates how to manage hedges to enhance their value for wildlife, improve shelter and create a stock-proof barrier for livestock.

Cross-Compliance

A workshop covering the 19 Statutory Management Requirements and six Good Agricultural and Environment Conditions that make up the Cross-Compliance regulations.

This helps farmers recognise areas that need attention to ensure that their Single Farm Payment and Agri-environment Scheme payments are protected.

Dealing with Farm Wastes

This workshop covers how to prepare the Farm Nutrient and Waste Management Plan required by agri-environment schemes, Agricultural Waste Regulations, and practical tips on how to manage clean water, dirty water and slurry to minimise the volume that needs to be stored.

These three workshops are held across the country and are designed to give practical help and guidance. A key feature is that the trainers are practising farmers who can place each topic in a practical farming context.

In the last three years:

- 750 workshops were held;
- 8,000 farmers attended; and
- 95% of farmers were satisfied or very satisfied with the training.



- Dealing with Farm Wastes workshop at Tom Moorhead's farm near Broughshane. Tom is pictured on the left showing the group a precast concrete tank that he had installed recently under the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme to contain dirty water from his cattle handling pens.



- John Milligan, second left, is pictured discussing the selection of hedge plants prior to the hedge planting demonstration as part of a Field Boundary Management workshop held at Gregg Somerville's farm near Dromara.

How can I attend these workshops?

Farmers who are members of an Agri-environment Scheme will be invited to these three workshops. If the date and time on the invitation doesn't suit, you can call CAFRE to check if a more suitable date is available.

For further information on agri-environmental training you can access information online at www.cafre.ac.uk, e-mail: enquiries@dardni.gov.uk or telephone (028) 9442 6849.

Climate Change and Global Warming - What is it all about?

What is climate change? It is when our climate changes as a result of global warming.

What is global warming? It is the overall warming of the planet.

What is causing it? Most of the warming over the last 50 years is likely due to human activities. Air-travel, burning fossil fuels, deforestation and agriculture all play their part.

How do these cause global warming? These activities release greenhouse gases.

What are greenhouse gases? The main greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide. It occurs naturally in our atmosphere. Other greenhouse gases include smoke, steam, fumes, methane, nitrous oxide, ozone and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

What do greenhouse gases do? Greenhouse gases keep the earth warm. They provide a protective layer that lets sunlight

in and retains heat. A greenhouse works the same way. Increasing the amount of greenhouse gases traps more heat - leading to global warming.

How much global warming has occurred? The average global temperature increased 0.75°C in the last 100 years. Scientists predict a further increase of up to 5°C in the next 100 years. The effects of such a dramatic rise could be devastating.

What are the effects of global warming? We are likely to experience:

- hotter drier summers;
- warmer wetter winters;
- changes in biodiversity and habitats;
- increased flooding and damaging storms leading to more erosion;
- potential impacts on crop yields and animal health;
- more coastal erosion.

Poorer countries will be hardest hit with erratic harvests, water scarcity and increasing extreme weather.

What can we do to stop global warming? By reducing carbon emissions we can reduce the effects of global warming.

What can farmers do? If every farmer takes action then together significant reductions in emissions can be made. Careful management of farmland and livestock can reduce unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions and keep carbon stored in the ground.

What is carbon storage? Plants use carbon dioxide when they grow. It can be fixed and stored by trees, soil or peat. Peatlands store more carbon per hectare than tropical rainforest. So, preserving peatlands and preventing soil erosion are excellent ways of storing carbon.

What can you do about climate change? Below are some ways to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and help carbon storage.

Reducing Emissions

Manage stocking rates
Livestock emit methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.

Low input grasslands
Increased N fertiliser application releases nitrous oxide. Fertiliser manufacture also results in greenhouse gas emissions.

Management of agri-environment land
Less intensive agricultural activity reduces tractor and fuel use.

Soil testing
Calculating accurate nutrient requirements leads to efficient nutrient spreading and reduces the need for bought fertilisers.

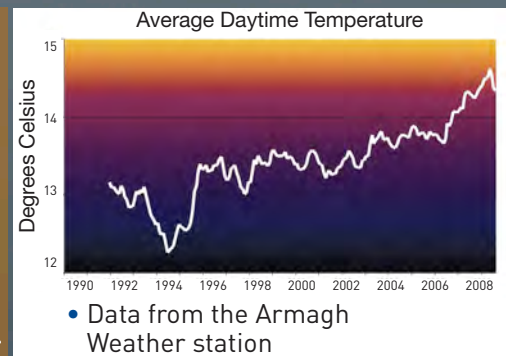
Carbon Storage

Planting trees
Planting trees absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Retaining carbon rich habitats
Preventing drainage, reclamation and overgrazing in moorland and lowland bog means the carbon is held within the habitat.

Retaining permanent pasture
Keeping unimproved and species rich grassland uncultivated means carbon is held in the soil.

Putting in place buffer strips/grass margins
Undisturbed margins keeps carbon dioxide locked in the soil.



The Code of Good Agricultural Practice



The revised Code of Good Agricultural Practice - full of practical advice.

Effective pollution control is essential on all farms. This means that all farm nutrients such as slurry, manure and farm effluents must be carefully stored and disposed of. It also means that farm wastes such as silage wrap, packaging materials, batteries and hedge trimmings must be disposed of in accordance with latest legislation.

Practical advice on preventing farm source pollution is contained on the enclosed CD-ROM of the recently revised Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Prevention of Pollution of Water, Air and Soil. Taking recent changes in environmental legislation into account, the Code describes a range of practical management techniques that can be used on farms to minimise the risk of pollution.

Reminders

Habitat	No grazing period
Species rich grassland (wet)	1 January - 15 May 1 January - 31 May (agreements signed before May 2005)
Species rich hay meadow	1 November - cutting date after 1 July
Blanket bog	1 November - 28/29 February - sheep only
Heather moorland	Sheep: 1 November - 28/29 February Cattle: 1 September - 31 May
Wetlands - fen, swamp, reedbeds	1 January - 31 May
Cutover lowland raised bog	1 November - 31 May
Winter feeding sites for swans and geese	1 October - 31 March
Optional Habitats	Dates to carry out work
Retention of winter stubble	No ploughing, cultivation or application of farmyard manure or herbicides permitted until after 15 February.
Lapwing breeding sites	Graze the sward tight to within 3cm by mid-March in preparation for nesting.
Work	Dates to carry out work
Heather regeneration - flailing / burning	1 September - 14 April
Tree planting	Within first year of your agreement or revised agreement.
Rush cutting: species rich and unimproved grassland, lapwing and breeding wader habitats	Between 15 July -15 March
Scrub control	Between 1 September - 28/29 February. Cut back small areas of scrub in rotation.
Hedge restoration	Coppice or lay before end February. Plant the metres noted on your farm management map in mild dry weather, October - March.
Hedge cutting	1 September - 28/29 February

CAP Health Check

In November 2008 Farm ministers reached agreement on the 'Health Check' - a review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Health Check builds on reforms introduced in 2005.

Since then, all direct agricultural support (including Single Farm and Agri-environment payments) are conditional on meeting a range of environmental and agricultural standards, known as Cross-Compliance.

The agricultural sector throughout Europe faces increasing challenges such as:

- fighting climate change;
- more efficient management of water; and
- preservation of biodiversity.

It is recognised that the best way of addressing these concerns in Northern Ireland is through the Rural Development Programme and in particular through our existing agri-environment schemes.

The NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) has the potential to deliver on these important issues. As a consequence there will be no disruption to the existing programme.

The fact that we have fully implemented the Nitrates Directive will allow its Cross-Compliance water quality commitments to be met without imposing any additional requirements for compulsory 'buffer strips'.

DARD remains committed to ensuring that European Commission environmental concerns are fully addressed through a local approach to the development and implementation of Cross-Compliance and agri-environment schemes.

Update Your Farm Map

Maps should be updated as soon as possible once land is sold, bought or used for building. Agri-environment Scheme claims cannot be processed until farm maps are updated and the Agri-environment Scheme agreement revised. Payments plus interest may be recovered for land removed from Agri-environment Scheme agreement within the first five years.

Keep Your Annual Claim Right

Please declare all uncompleted work on your annual management claim form, for example, incompleteness of field boundary work and tree planting.

Receive your newsletter by e-mail:

If you would prefer to receive your newsletter by email, please contact us at cmbenquiries@dardni.gov.uk and we will arrange to send an electronic version to you.

Please state your name, address and farm business identification number in your email.

For further information on agri-environment schemes, contact Countryside Management Branch at your local Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Office.

E-mail: cmbenquiries@dardni.gov.uk

Website: www.dardni.gov.uk