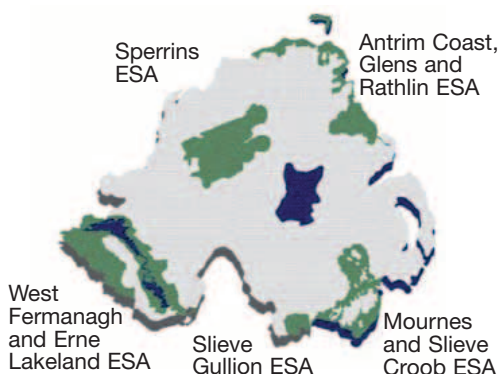


Countryside Management Newsletter

The DVD enclosed is a reproduction of the video produced to mark the success of the first ten years of the ESA Scheme. We would encourage you to watch this DVD.

Agri-environment Schemes 1988 – 2008 – making a difference

It was back in 1988 that the first Agri-environment Scheme was introduced – the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme in the Mournes and Slieve Croob. This marked a significant change in agricultural policy – for the first time recognising and rewarding the farmer for his role as manager of the countryside as well as the producer of food. By 1994 four more ESA areas had been designated covering 20% of the countryside - Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin; West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland; Sperrins and Slieve Gullion. These were areas of national importance for their landscape, biodiversity and heritage.



The introduction of the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) in 1999 marked another significant milestone in the development of agri-environment measures. This Scheme offered the opportunity for farmers outside these designated ESAs to enter into management agreements with DARD to farm in an environmentally friendly manner. By December 2006 – the end of the Rural Development Programme, some 13,000 farms were participating in these Schemes, with 40% of the agricultural land under agreement.

In June 2008 the new and improved single Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme – NICMS was launched. In this issue we feature a few farmers who are participating in existing Schemes, demonstrating that Agri-environment Schemes are making a difference to their farms. Also included is some information on the new Scheme (NICMS).

Mournes and Slieve Croob ESA

“Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea.” A key feature is the small fields diverse in shape and bounded by dry stone walls, hedges and sod banks. This creates an attractive traditional agricultural landscape which is renowned for its scenic beauty and wildlife. Work remains to be carried out if the character of this traditional countryside is to be retained and restored.

Thomas Cunningham from Castlewellan has been an ESA participant since 1994. He is enthusiastic about the Scheme and says, *“The ESA Scheme has provided encouragement to tackle jobs that benefit the farm and enhance the countryside.”* The Scheme is making a very positive impact. Thomas has restored a traditional building for use as a general purpose shed and over the last ten years has replaced gappy hedges on his farm. Thomas says, *“These new hedges are a great stock barrier and provide important shelter.”*

Thomas Cunningham on his farm in the Mournes.



Antrim Coast, Glens and Rathlin ESA

In July 1989, the middle Glens between Torr Head and Carnlough were designated as an ESA. This area was then extended to cover the nine Glens of Antrim and the surrounding coast from Portrush to Larne. Rathlin Island was also included, and has much to offer in terms of wildlife. Its mosaics of grassland and heath are important for survival of birds such as the chough and also support many rare plants, including orchids.

The north east boasts one of the most unique coastal landscapes in Europe with steep-sided glens sweeping down from the Antrim Plateau to the Irish Sea creating striking coastal scenery. Areas of semi-natural broadleaved woodland and scrub, traditional farmsteads and a vast array of historic monuments can be found within the landscape. Strips of woodland bordering many small watercourses and patches of hazel scrub cling to steep slopes and are valuable to wildlife.

Fields with dry stone wall, ditch or hedge boundaries run up the glen sides to create

'ladder' farms. Field boundaries are an important part of this landscape, both for visual impact and from a wildlife point of view. These boundaries, although needing to be positively managed, keep the patchwork appearance of the countryside and reflect our farming heritage. The basalt stone walls and uniform field pattern between Glenarm and Broughshane are very distinct.

Within farmland of the Antrim Coast and Glens there are many sites where inaccessibility or poor productivity have helped ensure the survival of important habitats.

West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland ESA

The West Fermanagh and Erne Lakeland ESA is highly valued for its scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and distinctive heritage by residents and visitors alike. A range of habitats can be found within the area - species-rich hay meadow, limestone grassland, wet pasture, blanket bog, woodland and scrub. Such habitats are important not only for wildlife, but for their visual impact on the landscape.

Around 10% of the county is waterways. Reducing the agricultural impact on these waterways is a priority. The Erne basin is a very important wetland site for breeding waders, especially snipe, curlew, lapwing and redshank. It is also recognised as an international site for overwintering whooper swans. The exceptional limestone grassland contains a rich variety of plants such as wild thyme and lady's bedstraw.

Dominant in the west of the county are an impressive range of hay meadows where hay rattle, ragged robin, orchids and many other wild flowers can be found. Fermanagh is renowned for its abundance of tall, mature hedges which contain a wide range of native species.

Maurice Law from Maguiresbridge has just completed a ten year ESA Scheme and continues to farm his remaining land under CMS. Maurice manages a suckler herd and has a great interest in rare breed animals. He recently added both Dexter and Irish Moiled cows to his herd.

He has a strong interest in hedge restoration and has woodland and lowland raised bog on the farm. Over the past few years, Maurice has extended the biodiversity value of the holding by establishing wild bird cover, restoring hedges and planting areas of native trees and traditional orchards. Maurice's keen

interest in hedges extends beyond his own farm. The satisfaction gained through restoring his hedges encouraged him to 'branch out'. He now runs a successful contracting service, planting and restoring hedges, fencing and other environmental work. Thanks to contractors such as Maurice, the structure, landscape patterns and biodiversity of field boundaries in the countryside are being restored for future generations.

Maurice Law and Ian Browne, Countryside Management Adviser discuss management of a newly planted hedge.



Farming in Slieve Gullion ESA

Around 13,800 hectares (ha) of agricultural land around Slieve Gullion was designated as an ESA in 1994 because of its scenic beauty, its wildlife and historic interest. The

Patrick Duffy from Cullyhanna discussing the management of his standing stone with Aidan Kerr, Countryside Management Adviser.



combination of mountain, field, woodland and bog results in a varied and attractive landscape. The dry heath moorland dominated Slieve Gullion mountain and surrounding ring dyke hills form a most distinctive landscape. In the valleys a patchwork of more productive farmland is neatly divided by a network of hedges and dry stone walls. Small pockets of broadleaved woodland containing a mixture of hazel, ash, oak and rowan provide valuable habitat for wildlife and contribute to the beauty of the landscape.

Patrick Duffy, a beef and sheep farmer from Cullyhanna farms in Slieve Gullion ESA. He is a dedicated ESA participant who signed his first agreement in 1995. Through the ESA Scheme Patrick is reinstating hedges by coppicing and interplanting.

The Slieve Gullion area is rich in archaeological remains. The standing stone on Patrick's farm remains today because of the care and respect it has received from the Duffy family in years gone by. Patrick also has part of the Dorsey ramparts on his farm. This is a man-made boundary estimated to be over 2000 years old. The name Dorsey comes from the Irish 'dorsa' meaning doors or gates and refers to passes through the earthworks. It is thought they were constructed to protect the ancient routeway between Armagh and Louth. Through the ESA Scheme Patrick has received advice from Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Countryside Management Branch on the management of these historic sites. He receives an annual payment to protect and maintain them.

Sperrins ESA

Around 87,000ha of agricultural land in the Sperrins was designated as ESA in 1994. The rolling mountains of the Sperrins stand in marked contrast to the glens, rivers, semi-natural oak and hazel woodland and historic monuments interspersed throughout this unique landscape. The valleys and lower slopes of the mountains, boast a traditional pattern of field boundaries which add interest to the local landscape.

Walter and Richard Fleming are sheep farmers and ESA participants since 1995. Livestock has shaped the pattern of farming in the Sperrins for many years and the Flemings farm sensitively in a way which will help to keep the landscape for future

generations to enjoy. They also manage their heather and rough moorland as grazing for sheep and as a valuable wildlife habitat.

On the Fleming's farm there is oak woodland associated with the river valleys and hillsides of the central glens. The boundaries are positively managed through ESA and are an important feature of the countryside – both for their visual impact and for wildlife.

This area is renowned for historic monuments. Walter and Richard Fleming have a well defined circular mound with a cist and associated large capstone in an area of improved grassland on the farm. Richard says, "The ESA Scheme complements the on-farm management system, and provides an annual payment

which allows us to manage and protect the more valuable areas such as heather, ungrazed oak woodland, species rich wet grassland and our archaeological site."

Walter and Richard Fleming discuss heather management with Vinny Smith, Countryside Management Adviser, DARD.





Philip Meeke and his stone wall restored through CMS.

Mixed Co. Down farm in CMS

Philip and Barry Meeke manage a dairy, beef and cereals farm with their father John, near Dromara in Co. Down. They joined CMS seven years ago, *"It encouraged us to look after our habitats and farm in an environmentally sensitive manner. On a family farm the Scheme income is very important."*

In spite of being very busy they have carried out a regular programme of hedge restoration and maintenance. They have laid many hedges on the farm and say, *"It is a great stockproof barrier and benefits wildlife. It gives us great satisfaction to see it develop over the years into a strong hedge."* They have a

succession of hedgerow trees of differing ages. As well as being attractive in the landscape, these trees provide summer shade for livestock and nesting sites for birds. Stone walls were also restored under the field boundary restoration plan.

There is a variety of habitats on this farm, including swamp, scrub and wet woodland. This year they have sown just under a hectare of a one year wild bird cover mix. Philip says, *"Wild bird cover is essential to provide food for birds during the winter months. The original traditional pillars and gate are very striking at the entrance. They add to the character of the farm and can still be functional for stock access."*

Bushmills farmer in CMS

Victor Chestnutt from Bushmills is a Texel breeder and also has a pedigree suckler herd. He has been a CMS participant since 2002 and has a wide range of habitats on his farm including scrub, woodland, heather moorland, wetland and species rich dry grassland. He says *"The Scheme is great. I'd recommend it to anyone. It's a great way to get things done around the farm and if, like me you're able to do a lot of the work yourself, then the money is useful too!"*

Victor has opted for arable options in the Scheme including wild bird cover and winter stubble. He sows wild bird cover as part of his arable rotation, followed with spring cereal which he retains as stubble over the following

winter. Initially he had not been impressed by the wild bird cover until out for a walk at Christmas. Victor says, *"I was amazed at the hundreds of birds that rose out of the cover and that so many were using it."* Victor also finds this area useful for extra sheep grazing in March before cultivating.

Victor is very pleased with the funding for hedge restoration and realises that it has really helped his boundaries. He prefers coppicing as he feels it is a better job. Victor appreciates that and says, *"Although the hedges can take a while to come, at the end of the day you know you've got something which will be there for at least the next generation."* He also planted an area in broadleaved woodland five years ago and is very pleased with the results. Victor has replaced many of his farm gates with a local

design of traditional gate. These look particularly striking along the roadside and around the yard. He has also restored a traditional building which has increased its life and usefulness.

Victor Chestnutt inspects his broadleaved woodland planted under CMS five years ago.



CMS Arable options for Kane Brothers

Brothers Michael and Boyd Kane are arable and sheep farmers at Myroe, Limavady, Co. Londonderry. They have been CMS participants since 2001 and say, *“The Scheme encourages farmers to positively manage their habitats with care and protection for the environment. It also allows us to incorporate the production of wholesome food with responsible management of the countryside.”* Both brothers emphasised that since joining the Scheme they have been learning as they go along and after the first couple of years have really begun to see the environmental benefits.

They have opted for many of the CMS arable options, including conservation crop margins, rough grass field margins, retention of winter stubble and wild bird cover. Michael and Boyd realise that, *“By integrating CMS arable options into everyday workings of the farm we can significantly contribute to biodiversity and ensure the long term viability of our business.”* They have also chosen to manage arable land for winter feeding sites for swans and geese. The brothers are particularly

impressed with their wild bird cover and have been amazed how farmland bird numbers have increased.

The brothers find the financial incentive very encouraging with little extra paperwork involved. They find CMS very useful as non-productive areas of the farm can be included in their agreement. The combine on the farm is equipped with a yield monitor and as a result low yielding areas such as headlands and field corners were identified and converted into rough grass margins – a CMS arable option.

Although a predominantly arable farm they also have a range of habitats on their farm, for example, fen and buffer zones. They are very passionate about all aspects of the Scheme and are interested in enhancing

the landscape. The value of their hedges has improved as they have undertaken approximately 1500m of hedge restoration.

They have also planted over 1ha of trees in small areas around their farm.

Boyd and Michael Kane from Myroe, Limavady planted trees to screen their farm buildings.



Boyd and Michael Kane discussing wild bird cover with Graeme Campbell, Countryside Management Adviser.

Northern Ireland Countryside Management

The new Agri-environment Scheme, NICMS, is part of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. It is part-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development with co-funding from DARD. The Scheme has been designed to help farmers improve the environment and the countryside through land management.

Currently around 40% of the farmland is managed under existing Schemes. The target is to increase the area covered by environmental enhancement agreements to 50% by 2013. This will mean approximately 18,000 participants in Agri-environment Schemes.

What are the aims of the NICMS?

The Scheme has three main aims. These are to:

- maintain and enhance biodiversity;
- assist implementation of the Water Framework Directive; and
- enhance landscape and heritage features.

How has NICMS been developed?

The Scheme has been developed through 20 years of experience gained working on agri-environment issues, and keeps many of the existing

features of CMS and ESA Schemes. Farmers groups, environmental groups and others have provided valuable feedback to DARD on the development of new aspects of the Scheme. Close attention has been paid to the need to improve water quality, biodiversity group recommendations and Natura 2000 requirements.

A minimum standard of environmental performance

All farm businesses entering the new Scheme will have to carry out a minimum level of environmental enhancement work on the farm. For example, if no farmland habitats are present, participants must carry out one biodiversity option (for example, rough grass field margin, tree planting) and one water quality option (for example, ungrazed grass margin).

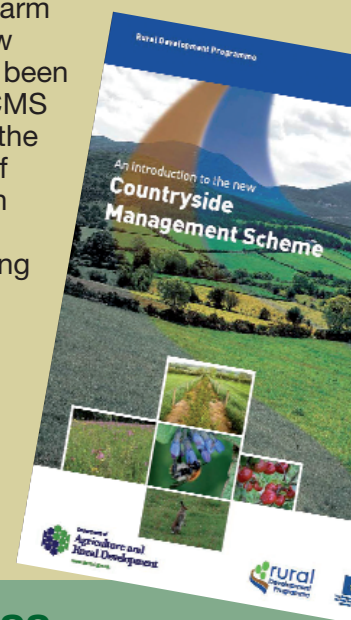
Making a difference to biodiversity

NICMS will contribute to the NI Programme for Government target of halting 'the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2016'. The management requirements that participants follow will maintain and enhance habitats for future generations. New options such as delayed

grazing/cutting of grassland and wild bird cover mixes will benefit important species such as the Irish hare and yellowhammers. Specially designated sites such as Natura 2000 areas can be entered into the NICMS. If these sites are not in favourable condition, they can only be entered into the NICMS when accompanied by an individual management plan developed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to identify appropriate management.

Making a difference to water quality

NICMS will contribute to the Water Framework Directive objective of achieving 'good status for all waters by 2015'. Farmers under agreement will draw up a Farm Nutrient and Waste Management Plan and an Application Plan for slurry, manure and farm effluents. New options have been added to NICMS to recognise the importance of waterways on the farm and provide funding to enhance them.



Further NICMS details will be available in the press

If there are too many applications for the Scheme, selection criteria and a scoring system may be applied to prioritise entry to the Scheme and to achieve greatest environmental benefit.



Department of
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nt Scheme (NICMS)

Making a difference to climate change, landscape and heritage

It is important to reduce human activities that contribute to climate change. Many of the activities in NICMS which restrict the disturbance of land can cut carbon emissions to the atmosphere. Increasing the area of woodland will also compensate for carbon dioxide emissions as trees absorb carbon.

Special Environmental Projects

A limited amount of funding will be available for those in NICMS to carry out 'one-off' projects that meet the aims of the Scheme. These projects can be proposed by farmers working individually or in groups and could involve for example, habitat creation, access facilities or restoration of historic features, to name but a few.

Payment rates

Individual payment rates have been reviewed and generally increased for those entering NICMS, to reflect the increased costs and reduced outputs for participants.



Lapwing, ©RSPB Images

Targeting conservation action for birds

Sally Fisher, RSPB

Several Northern Ireland's birds are classed as priority species because their numbers are low and declining. This includes birds such as the lapwing and yellowhammer. These priority species are set to benefit from a project running alongside the new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS). The Bird Conservation Targeting Project (BCTP) has brought together bird records from 2002 to 2007 from local bird recorders and national surveys, to create up-to-date maps of where these priority species are found. The maps will help guide agri-environment Schemes, allowing agreement holders to manage their land to meet the needs of priority birds.

We know that putting the right options for these birds in the right places helps to turn around declines. Farmers and landowners with birds such as curlew, lapwing, tree sparrow and yellowhammer will be encouraged to manage their land to benefit these birds. The BCTP is a UK wide project and in Northern Ireland it runs as a partnership between the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), Forestry Service (FS) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

For more information about the project, including how to input your bird records, visit www.rspb.org.uk/targeting.



'The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas'.

Monitoring of Agri-environment Schemes in Northern Ireland

Jim McAdam, Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

Agri-environment Schemes were put in place to maintain and improve habitats and landscape features. A monitoring programme was started in 1993 by Queen's University Belfast to find out how effective the ESA Scheme has been at doing this. Monitoring is funded by DARD and carried out independently.

Results from ten years of biological monitoring of the ESA Scheme showed maintenance and in some cases improvement on heather moorland and grassland habitats under agreement. For example, average heather cover of heather moorland had increased significantly. Landscape monitoring of the ESAs showed that losses or damage to habitats or landscape features mostly happened on non-participant land. Therefore Scheme participants had positively contributed to the maintenance of the landscape including important habitats like species-rich grassland and hedges.

Baseline monitoring of habitats and options in CMS was carried out in 2002/03 and results of a recent re-survey are currently being analysed. Results suggest that habitats have not changed significantly



Agri-environment Monitoring Unit carrying out a survey of a rough grass field margin in CMS.

and positive benefits include the improved condition of degraded heather moorland. Monitoring has shown that management under the Agri-environment Scheme

agreement has maintained the majority of habitats, therefore preventing any decline in quality.

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

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www.dardni.gov.uk