

Workshop format

Each workshop followed the same format; participants were asked to fill in a very brief questionnaire. This questionnaire was filled in before any explanation of HNV farmland was given. Farmers were asked to describe their farmland in about 5 words, they were also asked some questions to assess some of the Decision Support Tool requirements and whether or not they had heard of HNVf before.

Caroline Sullivan then explained the aims and objectives of the workshop, the timeline for the evening and then introduced HNVf and the categories that exist in Ireland.

Following this the workshop switched to a discussion forum focused on anything the farmers perceived as an obstacle or difficulty with farming this type of land. Where difficulties or problems were identified solutions were also discussed. Finally, what the farmers vision of supports was discussed.

Workshop results

Across each region the issues were broadly similar and fall under four categories. It is impossible to rank the categories and so they must all be considered together.

Problems encountered:

A) Keeping people on the land.

Summary

In all areas keeping the next generation of farmer on the land was identified as a clear issue. Many farmers in attendance had no successor or would not recommend this way of life for their own children. They identified a clear lack of incentives for older farmers to part with their land and also restrictions on younger farmers who were willing to take over this type of land. In many of these areas farming is supported by off-farm jobs and spouse jobs as farming small HNV farms doesn't

yield enough of a return to support an individual and certainly not a family. In most of these areas part-time work is seasonal or casual. This is not so prominent in areas like Wicklow due to the proximity to a large urban centre but this is unusual and almost every other HNVf area in the country is affected by a lack of available off-farm jobs.

Workshop output

Lack of next generation-no future farmers, no successors

Farming HNV farmland not viable-not enough money, no salaries, no guarantees

Often people have to juggle full-time farming with full-time jobs for at least part of the year. Part-time farming is forced on farmers in these areas.

Consistency among schemes, one size scheme fits all not workable, continuity of support schemes important. Longevity of schemes for people in these areas is very very important

Designations devalue the land from a commercial point of view. There are huge issues relating to planning for houses due to designations. This impacts the rural community such as inability to carry out non-farming activities such as forestry. Restrictions make farming this type of land in particular impossible

Young farmer scheme caps not encouraging-no incentive to take on more than 90ha

No concept of the effect of people leaving the land and moving onto e.g. social welfare etc

B) Land-type

Summary

The type of land that makes up HNV farmland presents its very own unique challenges that farmers whose farms are dominated by lowland improved agricultural grassland do not experience. HNV farms, especially whole HNV farms can be completely dominated by peatland habitats like wet heath and blanket bog. This presents many issues including limitations on the stock you can carry, limitations on the quality of stock you can rear from this land, high costs associated with overwintering stock and significant limitations to producing your own hay and silage. Many of the HNV farms in lowland areas are dominated by wet grassland (GS4). These farmers are particularly limited in the numbers of stock they can carry due to susceptibility to poaching. They are also at the mercy of the weather when it comes to making hay and silage.

Workshop output

Breaching disposal of stock rules due to farmland habitat e.g. hidden behind a rock, in a valley, gone off a cliff

Stock options are severely restricted. Hill sheep are the traditional but the market for hill sheep is poor. Angus and Hereford cows will graze the uplands but the market for these is also poor.

Destocking from 15th Nov to 15th May makes the lower land habitats unpalatable and there is a change in conditions

Housing cattle for 6 months of the year turned farmers away from traditional breeds or resulted in no more cattle where there used to be

High feed costs associated with farms dominated by semi-natural habitats. Feeds include concentrates, hay, silage. All these are bought in at high costs as silage or hay saving on your own land not possible (or minimal and totally weather dependant). This is particularly acute for whole HNV farm (i.e. farms with ~100% SN habitat) areas such as Connemara and West Mayo.

High proportion of semi-natural habitats designated. This leads to issues from a general management point of view as you need to get planning to carry out some activities that are a given for farmers in other areas.

Land-type can result in hill-walkers on your land. This results in damaged fences, damage to sensitive vegetation, bringing dogs on land, leaving rubbish. Blocking entrances with vehicles.

Daft minimum and maximum stock requirements with no tie to the land condition

Beef genomics-star rating inappropriate for cows in Connemara for replacements. Too much tissue sampling. Not suitable for this region. More geared to big numbers, good lowland farms.

Need to overwinter cattle at high costs-bedding is expensive and transported from the east. Feed costs and weather related harvest costs can be high

Hill sheep market is poor (former market in Med but no longer available). Spring lamb premiums unattainable. No market but in order to retain eligibility on land you need to stock it. Essentially stocking only to maintain habitat

Suckler cow genomics scheme not suitable for HNV areas

No programme for sheep

Wet grassland-carry low stock numbers, try to avoid poaching but very very difficult

Draining land not worth it, access difficult, quite a daunting task to start from nowhere.

ANC payments not adequately targeted to these areas

Commonage scheme requirements-no adequate training

Land not good enough to overwinter animals so forced to sell cattle in Autumn/Winter (at a time of poor prices) though this is not such a problem in Wicklow where there is a reduction in stock

options but stock are reasonable quality as the lowlands are reasonable quality and farmers here can save hay and silage and can even graze sheep over the winter.

Burning dates all wrong for the land, and not being able to burn land makes things difficult

Bracken is a problem, derogations are in place but much of the land affected is inaccessible

In Wicklow deer grazing is a problem— where you should get 160 bales from a patch you get 60 bales, breaking fences, TB in herd discouraging cattle in these areas. Much of the land here is planted. This results in increases in deer numbers and restrictions on burning (in case forestry burns). Need to maintain their fencing or else wastes time finding sheep.

Close to large population centre means there are sheep stolen and illegal dumping.

C) Weather

Summary

HNV farmland areas do experience higher and more frequent rainfall than non-HNVf areas. The uplands have to deal with higher rainfall and often high winds and also snow in the winter months. The winter season can last for 6 or 7 months in these areas forcing farmers to house cattle and having knock-on feed cost consequences. Winter storms can result in loss of stock that you never find and this can result in non-compliance of stock disposal regulations.

Workshop output

Longer winter-house animals for longer (6-7 months). This was a problem across all regions

High rainfall and high winds damage boundaries

Grass growth is poor

Poaching is a problem-can result in housing animals in August

So wet it's difficult to make silage-silage quality compromised

Ground conditions-difficult for the stock, machinery

Losing stock that you never find due to storms and floods

D) Government Agencies

Summary

Farms in HNVf areas often occur in areas of high scenic beauty and therefore often have nature conservation designations such as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs). There is a general feeling that DAFM regulations were developed with farms in other areas of Ireland in mind. It seems to the farmer that the habitats and conditions on these farms were not considered at all when schemes and regulations were being drawn up. Consequently, farmers in these areas feel that one size does not fit all and that inspectors should take the particular conditions of these areas into account when they are being inspected. They feel that if the inspectors were more familiar with farming in HNVf areas that they would be more understanding. There are also problems with transparency of regulations, how they are applied and how you might appeal them if you disagree with penalties. Assessments of land eligibility particularly need clear transparent guidelines. There are no clear guidelines on what constitutes a good quality eligible habitat and the nuances in grazing requirements to maintain these habitats in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). These problems are further compounded when the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) get involved as it can often lead to getting conflicting advice and threats of penalties from two government departments for polar opposite management requirements.

Farmers feel that these two agencies in particular should be working together to supporting farmers in these areas, not working against each other and the farmer.

Workshop output

Lack of commitment from relevant government agencies in relation to EU aims and objectives e.g. HNV farmland within the RDP

Lack of consultation between NPWS and DAFM is a major issue. On the one hand DAFM say clear scrub or be penalised and on the other hand NPWS say it's not scrub, it's hazel woodland, clear and be penalised.

Lack of transparency in relation to DAFM rules and regulations. Inspectors often make poor decisions in these areas with little available documentation available to back these decisions up

County Councils are not supportive in relation weed control. They are also not proactive about cleaning machinery between sites and they can be source of invasive alien species. They enforce regulations in some areas but not all.

By-laws that are introduced can unnecessarily penalise farmers e.g. fencing at the side of the roadside requiring planning permission

Lack of consultation with land-owners in relation to land access.

Proposed solutions:

A) Keeping people on the land

Supports need to suit the region-one size does NOT fit all

Western areas in particular would benefit from more part-time job opportunities

Building trust with outside agencies would be very helpful. Government departments need to be seen to be supporters of these areas

Longevity of schemes for people in these areas is very very important

B) Land-type

More considerate regulations or rules for these areas would be helpful particularly in relation to stock disposal, burning, bracken control, some flexibility with scrub control

Consistency among schemes and sensible schemes with more flexibility would be welcome

Appropriate supports for farming this particular type of land would decrease the incidence of reclamation that would ultimately revert back.

C) Weather

Potential to exploit the ANC scheme-use rainfall, soil type and altitude

D) Government agencies

Appropriate training for inspectors-need to be fully aware of the type of land and the issues associated with it. Could HNV inspectors be from HNV areas?

Supports:

Dream scheme: Region specific, rewards designation, incentivise young people and simple (reduced paperwork)

Farmers felt that monetising the importance of the landscape to the Irish economy-tourism, carbon sequestration, water quality etc would be useful as it crystallises what they are producing for no credit at the moment. Farmers in these areas provide pristine landscape

GLAS payments not enough. Upfront costs of plans are in the range of 50% of the ultimate draw-down. GLAS + payments can only be drawn down on commonage farms where they have rare breeds. Front-loading is preferable. Average farm in Connemara is 23ha.

Hill area pilot scheme essential. Twelve Ben scheme had stock removal

Need long-term options designed with inter-departmental co-operation and the option to tweak it until it is right. Participants need consistency and continuity

HNV farmers need recognition of the fact that intensive farmers are benefitting from the 'green' label of Ireland that HNV areas are providing. Seen as a 'green' island but the 'greenest' areas are the HNV areas