

## Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

### Annex IE.4. Examples of Result-based Payment Schemes in Ireland

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Operating alongside the general agri-environment scheme, targeted projects such as BurrenLIFE have delivered benefits for grasslands in Ireland (DCHG, 2019). A key component of the BurrenLIFE project was the development of a results-based agri-environment scheme approach with payments to farmers according to the delivery of measurable biodiversity objectives (e.g. flower indicator species diversity). This has received much positive attention for its success in engaging farmers and other stakeholders in delivering tangible socio-economic and environmental dividends for the region (Dunford, 2016). Indeed, the scheme's success was marked in 2017 with the European Commission recognising BurrenLIFE as the joint best LIFE project in the 25-year history of the programme (European Commission, 2017). The emergence of BurrenLIFE and the way it and its successor programmes have operated are described in detail in Dunford and Parr (2020) — until 2023, the most recent iteration (the Burren Programme) worked with over 300 farmers and formed part of a national programme funded under Ireland's Rural Development Programme.

Unfortunately, as the Irish Times reported in November 2022, the success of the Burren Programme 'could be undermined by the introduction of a new and expanded scheme under reforms of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy'. As a result, the co-founders of BurrenLIFE and the Burren Programme — who had been central to the schemes' success — resigned 'due to concerns about the environmental integrity of the replacement scheme which they fear could lead to decline of the Burren landscape' (O'Sullivan, 2022). After more than a decade in operation, the Burren Programme was due to change from 1 January 2023. As the Irish Times explains, 'Farmers will [then] have to transfer to the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme, known as Acres Burren Aran CP, covering a territory from the Aran Islands to east Galway. It is feared that this will also lead to a reduction in incentives for conservation measures, with the average payment dropping from €9 000 to €7 000' (O'Sullivan, 2022). As Brendan Dunford, one of the founders of BurrenLIFE and the Burren Programme, comments 'We welcome ambition and scaling but do regret the environmental integrity is diminished; certainly in the Burren' (O'Sullivan, 2022). Nevertheless, he urged farmers to apply for the new scheme despite his concerns as 'there is no other option' (O'Sullivan, 2022).

Following the success of the BurrenLIFE scheme, and prior to the rollout from 2023 of the expanded scheme described immediately above, research and pilot schemes trialled similar results-based approaches in other High Nature Value farming systems, including in Ireland and in Spain (RBAPS, 2019). In Ireland:

- the AranLIFE project had similar objectives to BurrenLIFE, adapted to the Aran islands;
- the KerryLIFE project applied the 'farming for conservation' concept to the Kerry uplands, and was specifically aimed at conserving the Freshwater Pearl Mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*);
- the RBAPS (Results-based Agri-Environment Payment Scheme) pilot project developed and trialled results-based methods for five agriculture-dependent biodiversity targets in County Leitrim and the Shannon Callows, including species-rich grasslands, breeding wader habitats and species-rich floodplain meadows;
- the NPWS's Farm Plan Scheme aims to promote 'a focussed, targeted and innovative approach to farming for habitats and species of conservation concern in some of Ireland's most important biodiversity areas' (see O'Rourke and Finn (2020) for detail on the aforementioned schemes);

- a Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) pilot project is targeted at farmers with land in six SPAs towards the west of the country;<sup>1</sup>
- a Freshwater Pearl Mussel project is aimed at farmland within the top eight catchments for the species in Ireland;<sup>2</sup>
- a 'Protecting Farmland Pollinators' project is aimed at developing and testing a whole-farm pollinator scoring system and identifying what management practices on Irish farmland benefit pollinators;<sup>3</sup> and
- the BRIDE (Biodiversity Regeneration in a Dairying Environment) Project (2020), based in the River Bride catchment of north-east County Cork and west Waterford, is aimed at designing and implementing a results-based approach to conserve, enhance and restore habitats in lowland intensive farmland.<sup>4</sup>

Given the success of BurrenLIFE and its successor programmes and the fact that BurrenLIFE is held up across Europe as 'an emblematic LIFE nature project', it is to be hoped that a resolution will be found quickly that allows for the scheme's expansion in Ireland without any loss in environmental integrity.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> [www.henharrierproject.ie/](http://www.henharrierproject.ie/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.pearlmusselproject.ie/](http://www.pearlmusselproject.ie/)

<sup>3</sup> [www.biodiversityireland.ie/projects/protecting-farmland-pollinators/about/](http://www.biodiversityireland.ie/projects/protecting-farmland-pollinators/about/)

<sup>4</sup> [www.thebrideproject.ie/](http://www.thebrideproject.ie/)