

# The Burren Programme

Due to the unique landscape, farmers in this region face many environmental challenges which the traditional agri-environmental schemes do not address. This project works with farmers to achieve specific environmental outcomes, rewarded by payments, and also makes funds available for farmers to invest in self-selected, but pre-approved, conservation projects. Environmental targets are set and monitored by farm advisors, performance is scored and payments are made based on the scoring system.



## Summary

The Burren Programme is described by Dunford, the project leader, as a 'hybrid' approach whereby participating farmers are rewarded annually for their environmental performance while also having access to a fund to carry out self-nominated 'conservation support actions' to help improve this performance over time. The typical 'action-led' approach to agri-environmental schemes is enhanced to encourage farmers to undertake conservation actions specifically designed to improve the environmental health of their farm, and to enhance their income through the new, complementary, results-based payment. 5-year contracts are offered to all participating farmers, with the last of the contracts set to expire in December 2022. The project has an outline budget of approximately €10m supporting 328 farmers and 23,000 hectares of target habitat. Farmers sign a five-year plan with extensions of two years in some cases and farmers are afforded flexibility in undertaking conservation actions.

### Objectives

1. To ensure the sustainable agricultural management of high nature value farmland in the Burren, improving water quality and usage, and supporting the landscape and cultural heritage of the region.
2. To contribute to the positive management of the Burren's landscape and cultural heritage.
3. To contribute to improvements in water quality and water usage efficiency in the Burren region.



### Problem description

The Burren extends over an estimated 72,000 ha of land in Counties Clare and Galway (Ireland). It is defined by the presence of exposed limestone, the calcium-rich skeletal remains of marine organisms that populated the seas over 340m years ago. The Burren has recently been recognised through UNESCO Geopark Status, over 30,000 ha of the Burren is designated as Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and an additional 2,000 ha designated as Special Protection Area under the Birds Directive (79/409/EEC). A study by Dunford (2001) estimated that stocking levels in the Burren increased from 0.38LU/ha in 1970 to 0.66LU/ha in 2000, a 73% increase. During this time, it is estimated that approximately 30% of the Burren's archaeological sites were lost due to land reclamation. Silage gradually replaced the naturally available forage of the winterage pastures, resulting in reduced levels of grazing which contributed to a loss of biodiversity and accelerated levels of scrub encroachment. The initial stimulus for the project came from local farmers who, feeling threatened by SAC designations and environmental programme conditions, decided to engage constructively with researchers and public authorities to find a way forward.

## RESULT-BASED



## COLLECTIVE



The project operates a 'hybrid' approach whereby farmers are rewarded annually for their environmental performance while also having access to a fund to carry out self-nominated 'conservation support actions' to help improve this performance over time.

## PUBLIC GOODS



Landscape and scenery



(Farmland) biodiversity



Soil quality (and health)



Rural viability and vitality



Cultural heritage



Water quality

## CONTRACT

### Financing party:

Government (with EU-funding)

It is a public-private contract.



### Contract conclusion:

Written agreement



### Payment mechanism:

Incentive payments



### Length of participation in scheme:

5 years

### Start of the program:

2010

**End:** continues today

The project has evolved over an almost 20 year period using various EU funding sources

## Data and Facts - Contract

**Indirect effects:** The programme is closely aligned with a local NGO Burrenbeo which was established to tell the story of the living Burren. Burrenbeo helped to reshape the narrative around the Burren to one which also celebrated local people, place and tradition. Burrenbeo also helped engage the broader community through monthly walks and talks, volunteering events and festivals, including 'Burren in Bloom' and the 'Burren Winterage Weekend' which are unique celebrations of the rich legacy of pastoral farming in the Burren.

**Participation:** In the contract solution 328 farmers are involved and 23,000 ha of target habitat.

**Involved parties:** All Burren programme farmers are offered a simple 5-year contract outlining the baseline situation on the farm and suggested priority actions to improve the farm environment. By signing this 5-year plan the farmer agrees to abide by the Terms and Conditions. A set of procedure manuals translates these T&Cs into detailed procedures to be undertaken by the project team, who are responsible for the successful delivery of the programme, in conjunction with the farmer.

**Management requirements for farmers:** Environmental targets and an action plan is set by the farm advisor and the programme team. Farmers must implement this and perform along a scoring system to ensure payment.

**Funding/ Payments:** The programme is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy. Each farmer's payment depends on the score they receive on their assessment on a per hectare basis. For example, a winterage score of 5 yields €60/ha, 6 yields €72/ha, 8 yields €96/ha on a farm of between 10 and 40 hectares. The payment system contains a number of innovations designed to encourage an improvement in management and thus site condition, rather than settling for the status quo. For example, no payments are issued for scores less than 5, based on the assumption that this basic level of management is already covered under BPS and/or AES measures, and so a greater effort is required for payment under the Burren Programme. The average payment is approximately €3,500 per farmer.

**Controls/monitoring:** Farm advisors score performance using an evidence based system while on a site visit. Burren Programme team members validate scores on approximately 30% of farms annually.

**Renewal / termination:** 5 year contracts, with extensions of two years in some cases. Some contracts have rolled over since the first programme in 2010.



## LOCATION

### IRELAND

It is conducted in a specific region. Given the resource intensity it is difficult to judge whether it can be implemented nationally.

**Risk/uncertainties of participants:** The farmer runs the risk of not scoring highly enough to qualify for payments.

**Conditions of participation:** Farmers must apply to the scheme, attend an initial induction meeting and then devise a farm plan for environmental improvements with their designated farm advisor. The annual summer assessment conducted by the advisor is the approval process for the performance payments. The environmental health assessment assesses the management of each field in terms of both the actual management, the management that is needed to get it into the best condition for it to function as a species-rich limestone grassland/heath, and the ecological integrity of the grazed habitats present. A scoring system, underpinned by evidence-based information, helps to create a very robust, detailed and objective system. The scoring system is conducted on site by the farm advisor each year, validated by the project team and submitted to the Department of Agriculture for payment.



## Context features

**Landscape and climate:** The Burren extends over an estimated 72,000 ha of land in Counties Clare and Galway (Ireland). It is defined by the presence of exposed limestone, the calcium-rich skeletal remains of marine organisms that populated the seas over 340m years ago. Over time, these remains were compressed and elevated to reveal the massive, fossil-rich limestone terraces which prevail today. The region hosts over 70% of Ireland's native flora and is one of the best surviving areas for bumblebees in Ireland, it is home to at least half of the 570 macro-moths recorded in Ireland and 30 of Ireland's 34 butterfly species. Over 60 species of snail are found in the Burren, as are most of Ireland's native bat species. Ireland's only native reptile, the common lizard (*Zootoca vivipara*) and the introduced slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*) are frequently seen. Farmland birds such as Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*), Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*), Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*), Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) and Common Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) are declining elsewhere but can still be found in suitable Burren habitats, as well as birds of prey such as the Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

**Farm structure:** Given the rocky nature of the Burren, it is a pastoral landscape, most Burren farmers are specialist producers of suckler beef, with a typical herd size of 30-40 cows, usually composed of a mixture of continental-cross (Charolais, Limousin, Simmental) animals. Typically, farmers sell the weanlings from these cows at local sales in Autumn where generally good prices are made, with many male calves destined for the export market, many of the females sold for breeding. A small number of dairy farms continue to operate in the region, while sheep farming persists mainly in parts of the east Burren.



## SUCCESS OR FAILURE?



The programme has been a success in that it has engaged and re-engaged many farmers to implement management techniques and make investments that have been beneficial to the environment and economic viability of this unique landscape. Following an evaluation of the programme in 2020, The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine calculates that improvements in landscape and habitat quality are worth at least €32.8 million and the programme has generated €23 million in local economic activity since 2010.

## Reasons for success:

Co-creation was an important success factor. Although the programme was born from a PhD project, it respected farmer's ideas and their role in finding solutions. Furthermore, a team of four locally-based staff were appointed to run the project, some with extensive research experience in the Burren, which allowed the team, and the project, to get off on the right foot, with a good level of trust and credibility. 'Learning by doing' was another success factor, the project demonstrated in real-time what 'conservation farming' looked like and proved that it can in fact improve agricultural efficiency and performance (e.g. reducing input costs and/or increasing stocking levels). This was a lesson that surprised some farmers and engaged many more. Although it addresses a complex issue, a key success factor was the ability to keep farmer participation simple and non-onerous. This is reflected, for example, in the simplicity of the farm plans and clarity of the payments (per score and per task) and is enabled by the high level of available support for the farmer from the local programme office and from the trained farm advisors.

## SWOT analysis



## Main external factors influencing success

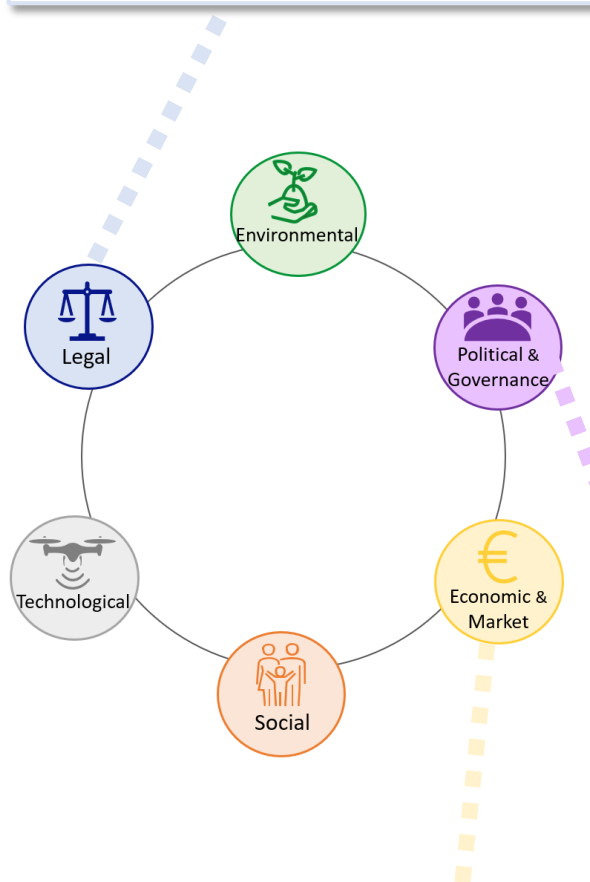
Political/governance, economic/market, social, technological, legal and environmental factors can all have a strong impact on the success of contract solutions. In this case study, an in-depth analysis found that the following, selected factors were of specific importance.



### The Burren program is implemented in a landscape under specific protection since already 30 years:

In the late 1990s large tracts of the Burren, namely an area of 30,000 ha, was designated a *Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)* under the *EU Habitats Directive*. An additional 2,000 ha were designated as Special Protection Area under the *Birds Directive (79/409/EEC)* and, moreover, the Burren has recently been recognised through *UNESCO Geopark Status*.

>> *In case of the Burren, the protected area status is perceived as a driver for the current conservation measures as it laid ground for the BurrenLife Project and consequently the program.* <<



### Institutions, governance and formal structures in a public result-based program:

- ★ In the Burren Program, the **Irish Department of Agriculture** is the main funding body.
- ★ Moreover, the program is overseen by an own program team which comprises **7 locally-based staff**, some with extensive research experience in the Burren, which allowed the team, and the project, to get off on the right foot, with a good level of trust and credibility.
- ★ The program team is led by a **project manager** with direct experience of working with local farmers and engaging in scientific research.
- ★ Moreover, a **project scientist** is employed to oversee project monitoring and advise on planned works. Both project leader and project scientist have been involved in the project for many years.
- ★ In the current round of the program, the project team is supported by **12 specially trained private farm advisors**.

**Low intensive agriculture, low income - agri-environmental contract solutions represent an important part of income:** Operating farms in the Burren are typically small-scale beef cattle farms with low levels of intensity, and typically low income which is mainly derived from direct payments rather than agricultural production output.



The usual approach to increase income is the intensification of livestock farming, reclamation of lands, and substitution of silage for the traditional winterage pastures, all negatively impacting on biodiversity, the preservation of cultural and archaeological sites and led to an encroachment of scrub.

>> *With the advent of the result-based Burren program however, farm income could be boosted by providing additional payments for environmental performance.* <<