



HEN HARRIER PROGRAMME



Demonstration of New Approaches for
managing Cattle on Upland Pastures



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Bia agus Mara
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Food and the Marine



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



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CONTACT

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For logistic reasons participation in this demonstration is limited to farmers in the Slieve Aughties SPA or the Stacks, Mullagherierks, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA.

Numbers are limited, and the demonstration must start before the end of May. If you want to be considered, please indicate if you are interested in:

Block 1: Grazing your own animals on upland sites.

Block 2: Grazing animals to be purchased in consultation with the Hen Harrier Project and Dawn Meats on upland sites.

Note: The feed buckets may be made available for purchase by farmers outside of the demonstration subject to demand.

DEMONSTRATION OF NEW APPROACHES FOR MANAGING CATTLE ON UPLAND PASTURES

BACKGROUND

The grazing of upland pastures (particularly peatlands) by cattle at suitable stocking densities can have a beneficial effect on biodiversity. It can also reduce wildfire risk by preventing the excessive dominance of Purple Moor Grass. Carefully managed extensive grazing can improve the utilisation of the upland pastures securing their continued eligibility for direct payments and freeing up undesignated lowland areas for silage production. This is nothing new, summer grazing of uplands was traditional practice but today it can be used to deliver valuable ecosystem services that supplement the value of agricultural output from the land.

The forage available on the uplands changes dramatically during the growing season. In early summer Purple Moor Grass growth is supported by nutrients stored over the winter in the plants roots. During June, the nutritional value can be quite good, but this falls off dramatically after July. Cattle introduced to the hill after July may avoid areas of dense Purple Moor grass due to its reduced palatability that late in the summer.

Under grazed Purple Moor Grass can dominate large areas, its dead leaves give many bogs the white grass look in winter and spring. The dead leaves dry out rapidly in sunny windy weather and create a substantial spring wildfire risk. Burning (controlled or otherwise) does not address the problem, the living part of the plant is below ground and is unharmed by spring fires. In fact, fires serve to kill off competing plants leading to increased dominance by Purple Moor Grass.

These fires pose a real risk to wildlife including the Hen Harrier, they threaten the eligibility of land for direct payments, they are a risk to people and property including fencing and tackling them diverts fire brigade and defence force resources. These are real problems and the best way to address them is by supporting cattle grazing on the uplands during the summer months.

It may not be enough to just introduce a few cattle or ponies. On large sites animals may just congregate in favoured areas, leaving large areas under grazed. Management is needed to achieve a more evenly distributed grazing pattern.

To be successful (and profitable) this must ensure that:

- Suitable stock are present in June and July when the nutritional value of Purple Moor grass is at its highest. Mature Cattle or Ponies are best.
- Cattle are encouraged to utilise areas of the site that they would tend to ignore.
- Cattle extract the maximum nutritional value from the grazing available. Animal health risks are managed to ensure that cattle can maintain growth and condition.

To achieve these objectives, we need to optimise land management strategies in a manner that delivers a profit from the animals used to deliver ecosystem services. Ideally the farmer can derive an income from both ends of this process, an income from the sale of cattle and a payment for the delivery of ecosystem services from the Hen Harrier Project. To help us develop optimal supports for farmers the Hen Harrier Project is running a demonstration project on selected farms over the next two years in the Slieve Aughties SPA or the Stacks, Mullagherierks, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA.

APPROACH

The approach to be used in the demonstration is two pronged, we will use low moisture blocks or feed buckets developed by Devenish Nutrition as a tool to influence animal behaviour to help achieve habitat management goals and to help sustain weight gain by cattle. In parallel with this and in conjunction with our partners in Dawn Meats we will assess the market for cattle produced sustainably on farms that deliver valuable habitats for Hen Harriers and other wildlife.

In conjunction with Devenish Nutrition we have developed a Low Moisture Block. This is new product unlike anything else on the market. It has a high protein content which helps with weight gain, it also provides a Nitrogen source which supports bacteria in the animal's gut and helps ensure that plant matter is fully digested and its nutritional value to the animal is maximised. The block also supplies vitamins and essential minerals.

Note: The blocks are not safe for sheep or horses due to the levels of Copper, Iodine and Selenium.

Animals will be introduced to the blocks on lowland fields and will seek them out once released into upland sites. The blocks can be moved around to encourage animals away from entrances, water sources and sweeter grasses. They can be coupled with salt licks to encourage a triangular movement pattern that optimises site utilisation. The blocks will be supplied free of charge to 40 farmers in the Slieve Aughties SPA and the Stacks, Mullagherierks, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle SPA. Cattle in these herds will be weighed (again free of charge) before going to the hill and after coming down. The results will help fine tune the development of best practice guides for cattle grazing in upland areas.

DEMONSTRATION

In this demonstration the participating farmer, the Hen Harrier Project, Devenish Nutrition and Dawn Meats will work towards unlocking the potential of cattle grazing in the uplands. Working together they will seek to develop best practice for producing beef and environmental goods. They will also seek to communicate this to the consumer and to develop markets for beef from farms delivering ecosystem services. Within this partnership -

The farmer will:

- Purchase these animals at the end of May and undertake to graze them on designated upland parcels for the months of June, July and August. Each farmer will be required to purchase between 3 and 10 animals.

The Hen Harrier Project will:

- Pay for the transport of animals to the farm;
- Pay for a veterinary check and the cost of any dosing or vaccinations required;
- Provide a livestock weighing service before stock go to the hill and after coming down;
- Manage the logistics of distributing the feed buckets and Salt licks; and,
- Pay the farmer €216 for their time in engaging with the Hen Harrier Project in the delivery of this demonstration. This payment is in addition to any payment due under the Hen Harrier Program.

Devenish Nutrition will:

- Supply the feed buckets required for the demonstration.

Dawn Meats will:

- Buy these animals from the farmer at the end of the demonstration. They will pay 10c/ kg over and above the national average price for animals of that grade as quoted in the Farmer Journal for the week that the animals are sold;
- Dawn will pay an additional 4c/ kg if these animals meet Dawns quality standards; and,
- Dawn will use the meat from these animals for market testing to establish how a market can be developed for meat produced through sustainable farming in the uplands.

Farmers who wish to participate in this part of the demonstration should contact the Project Agricultural Officer Eoin McCarthy at (087) 7034348 or by e-mail to eoin.mccarthy@henharrierproject.ie as soon as possible.

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