

2022 Masters in Agricultural Innovation Support

Project Summary

1. Project Title and Associated Programme

KT Programme	Beef and sheep KT and European Innovation Partnerships
Project title	Comeragh Mountains upland farming – monetary effects of adjusting farm management techniques and stocking rates to achieve improvements or maintenance of the upland habitats

2. Project background

In EU and Irish policies, there is increasing emphasis on the value of uplands for biodiversity, climate and water in addition to producing quality food. This is reflected in the introduction of a results based payments model in the new AECM CAP Strategic Plan 2023 to 2027.

Increasing quality of habitats may involve additional costs arising from changes in the management necessary to maximise results based payments. The integrated workings of upland and lowland management may need to be altered so that the uplands are grazed/managed at the optimum time. However, there is little or no evidence-based information on the income foregone and costs by upland farmers for altering their farm/sheep management systems to maintain or improve habitat conditions.

The Comeragh Upland Communities EIP project has assessed habitat conditions on ten Comeragh Mountain uplands. The data from the project provides a basis for stocking rate recommendations for habitat maintenance and improvement. Changes in stocking rate and management practices will be identified and costed.

3. Project aims and objectives

The objective of the project is to provide evidence of the effect on income on Comeragh farmers on upland farms when stocking rate and farming practice changes are needed to achieve improvements or maintenance of the upland habitats

The aims of this study are:

- To investigate farming practices other than stocking rate which may need to be adjusted to improve habitat condition
- To identify the monetary effect of management change needed to improve upland habitats
- To identify the break point at which result based models offset any monetary changes
- To identify the challenges for Teagasc KT to advise in these scenarios and how advisors can be empowered in this area

- To contribute to developing the theoretical understanding of farmers in the uplands moving from an action based environmental scheme to a results based payments scheme.

4. Suggestions for methodology (max 150 words)

Literature review

- Review current advice for optimising the production of upland sheep systems including stocking rates, months grazing, practices and feeding regimes.
- Review current advice for best practice for upland habitat management including stocking rates, months grazing, practices and feeding regimes.
- Identify the management differences between production and habitat management
- Review the economic data of upland farms from the NFS and upland monitor farms.

Methods

- Review the upland system data and habitat surveys of the uplands that participated in the EIP project.
- Conduct interviews with farmers to assess factors influencing their decision making process on upland flock management systems, stocking rates and financial returns
- Identify factors influencing Profit monitors of farmers and assess the effect of these factors
- Identify and cost the changes in their management systems by prioritising habitat condition over production

Discussion

Discuss the results of monetary farm management changes required to improve or maintain habitat condition

5. Expected Impact of the Project

- This study will identify how Teagasc advisors can assist hill sheep farmers farm the uplands in a sustainable way to improve habitat condition and adjust to the new Agri Environment Results Based payments
- It will assess the value of the Discussion Group as a KT tool in the exchange of upland habitat management knowledge.
- It will provides an ideal opportunity to progress and integrate the objectives of two Teagasc KT Programmes - Sheep and Environment to promote sustainable upland farming.

Currently Teagasc has limited current upland research on best practice of upland habitat management. Therefore, there is increased need on advisors to support upland farmers in management for climate change and biodiversity. The knowledge generated by this project will assist advisers in providing them with information that is central to keeping their upland enterprises viable, protect and enhance habitats and avoid land abandonment.