

# EIP-AGRI Operational Group MacGillycuddy Reeks

Collective and results-based approaches help sustain farm viability in an Irish Natura 2000 site

## EAFRD-funded projects

**Location:** MacGillycuddy Reeks, Ireland

**Programming period:** 2014-2020

**Priority:** P4 – Ecosystems management

**Focus Area:** Biodiversity restoration, preservation & enhancement

**Measures:** M16 – Cooperation

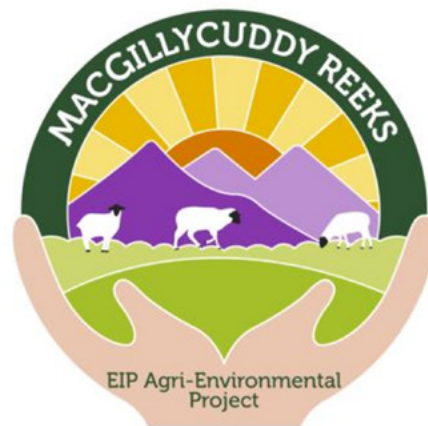
**Funding:** RDP support – 950 000 (EUR)

**Timeframe:** 2018 to 2023

**Project promoter:** South Kerry Development Partnership CLG

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## Summary

In cooperation with the MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Access Forum, the South Kerry Development Partnership recognised the need to try to support farmers to improve the sustainability and economic viability of farming in the MacGillycuddy Reeks. This was to be done through the development of practical, achievable results-led actions and innovative solutions in order to improve the conditions of the habitats of the Natura 2000 area, in close conjunction with local landowners/farmers. The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP-AGRI Operational Group had three main components: a results-based habitat assessment; actions-based payments for work carried out (Rhododendron ponticum and bracken management) and for attendance at training; and supporting actions, e.g. site visits, establishing 'collective groups', demonstrations of new technologies.

## Project results

- 14 land parcels improved in their habitat results-based baseline score, five land parcels remained unchanged and one land parcel declined slightly by five points.
- The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP-AGRI Operational Group raised awareness about the importance of the habitats and species contained in the MacGillycuddy Reeks.

- Bracken treatment was carried out across 18 sites, covering over 70.47ha.
- Rhododendron treatment was carried out across 24 sites, covering over 131.2ha.

## Key lessons and recommendations

- Combining results-based and action-based approaches can help ensure and define value for money from CAP funding.
- 'Collective groups' can not only support farmers in treating invasive species but they also encourage social networking, develop the skills of the local workforce and create employment opportunities for farmers and other people in local communities.

## Context

The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP-AGRI Operational Group builds on the findings of work carried out primarily by South Kerry Development Partnership, (a non-for-profit Local Development Company, focused on rural and community development) in conjunction with the MacGillycuddy Reeks Forum. The Forum works with landowners and farmers who facilitate recreational access to Ireland's highest mountain range, which is located in the MacGillycuddy Reeks: an upland area of just under 10 000 ha in Kerry, in south west Ireland. The



Forum was initially a pilot government initiative set up to explore and address access issues and develop permissive access agreements to upland privately owned land. It is a voluntary multi-stakeholder group comprising farmers, local community groups, recreational guides, the local authority, tourism authority - Fáilte Ireland, National Parks & Wildlife Service with funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

The Forum identified the need to improve the sustainability and economic viability of farming in the MacGillycuddy Reeks. Thus, an application was submitted to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) for funding as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 under the European Innovation Partnership for Agriculture Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI).

## Objectives

The aim of this results-based project was to improve the sustainability and economic viability of farming through the development of practical, achievable actions and innovative solutions in order to improve the condition of the habitats of this unique Natura 2000 area, in close conjunction with landowners/farmers in the area.

## Activities

One full time project manager, a part-time ecologist and a part-time administrator were recruited to administer the scheme. EUR 713 029 in funding was provided to farmers in order for them to make improvements in habitat conditions using results-based assessments; for completing treatment on Rhododendron ponticum (a large evergreen shrub which is invasive in Ireland) and bracken; targeted grazing with cattle; cutting mature heather; and seed collection along with other supporting actions. The activities of the MacGillycuddy EIP-AGRI project were:

- QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) Level 5 Handheld (pesticide) knapsack training - 32 farmers - both participants and other farmers in the Project Area.
- Practical Rhododendron ponticum treatment. 11 participants trained, both farmers and local people who were trained to support farmers carry out treatment.
- QQI Level 4 Chainsaw Operations, nine farmers and local people trained.
- Specialist workshops for farmers and the wider public on: Activities requiring consent with the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), succession planning and taxation with a solicitor, habitat awareness training with an ecologist, bracken and scrub management

workshops with NPWS, upland cattle grazing workshop, maximising profits from upland hill farming talk with support from the College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise.

- Facilitated over 20 site visits in the Reeks to groups from: Wildlife Biology Students from Munster Technological University, Ecology and Practical Fieldwork Students, and the Mournes Heritage Trust to Wicklow Uplands Council.
- Six primary and post primary school visits (agri-science and transition year students) and online presentations on the Reeks EIP Project.
- Five 'collective groups' were established with specialist training to support farmers. These groups often consisted of part time farmers and local people who wanted to learn new skills and apply them locally. This action focused heavily on building capacity locally instead of depending on contractors to be brought in. The initiative delivered a strong sense of pride, built strong environmental principles, developed an excellent social element and retained the economic return to the local area.
- New technologies explored including: a demonstration event on the 'Robocut machine' - a remote controlled cutting machine to cut dense vegetation e.g. bracken, gorse, degenerate heather without causing damage to sensitive habitats and 'No Fence Collars' using GPS equipment for use on cattle for targeted upland grazing.
- Supported the hosting of the first Irish conference on Rhododendron ponticum and publication of a treatment leaflet in conjunction with the Kerry UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.



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## Main results

- Since the start of the project, 14 land parcels improved in their habitat results-based baseline score, five land parcels remained unchanged and one land parcel declined slightly by five points. Improvements across the 14 sites ranged from five point to 55 points, with an average of 16.5 points.
- The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project created awareness of the importance of the habitats and species contained in the MacGillycuddy Reeks.
- It delivered and facilitated specialist training to ensure farmers could carry out management to best practice standards and ensured that capacity is developed locally to carry out required work, therefore being economically, socially and environmentally sustainable in the long term.
- Bracken treatment was carried out across 18 sites, covering over 70.47ha.
- Rhododendron treatment was carried out across 24 sites, covering over 131.20ha.
- Over 4 000 visitor surveys undertaken.
- The Operational Group were runners-up in 2022-2021 International Mountain Protection awards from the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation, which recognised the significant locally led approach and collaborative and innovative work undertaken.

## Key lessons and recommendations

- 'Collective groups' can support farmers in treating an invasive species which would be unmanageable on their own. They also encourage social networking and reduce the impact of rural isolation. At the same time, they support economic development by developing a skilled local sustainable workforce and providing regular part-time employment opportunities for farmers and other people in the local community.
- Combining results-based and action-based approaches can help ensure and define value for money from CAP funding.
- The use of 'No Fence' collars have huge potential for supporting targeted conservation grazing of large, unfenced commonages, reducing the potential for wildfire.
- Recreational pressure is having a big impact on sensitive upland habitats and needs the coordinated effort of multiple government departments to be addressed effectively.



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- Small scale EIP-AGRI projects have the potential, due to their flexibility, to deliver measurable and positive results when appropriate time and assistance is given to participants.

***"I thought they couldn't do it - treating the rhododendron, because I tried myself and failed, but they proved me wrong - a great success."***

Farmer participating in the EIP-AGRI Operational Group

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### Additional information

[twitter.com/ReeksForum](https://twitter.com/ReeksForum)



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