

# EIP Operational Group - Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS)

Conserving farm biodiversity habitats on common land and upland in Ireland.



## RDP-funded projects

**Country:** Ireland  
**Location:** Wicklow/Dublin Uplands/Vimpeli, Alajärvi, Lapua and Kauhava  
**Programming period:** 2014-2020  
**RDP Priority:** P4. Ecosystems management  
**Focus Area:** Biodiversity restoration, preservation & enhancement  
**Measures:** M16. Cooperation  
**Funding:** RDP support 1 740 000 (EUR)  
**Timeframe:** 02.2018 - 12.2022  
**Project promoter:** Wicklow Uplands Council\*  
 \*The Project promoter/beneficiary is an EIP Operational Group (<https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/en>)  
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## Summary

The EIP Operational Group - Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) was initiated by Wicklow Uplands Council to trial practical and innovation solutions to address some of the complex agricultural, environmental and socio-economic challenges associated with common land and hill farms in the Wicklow and Dublin uplands. The Operational Group successfully built capacity amongst participating farmers towards managing and improving the natural habitat quality of their upland areas in a sustainable manner through ongoing engagement, training and knowledge exchange. Importantly, the project helped change attitudes within the farming community in relation to how they view their role in managing the uplands. The project inspired a more holistic approach towards farming the uplands, integrating animal production with the provision of ecosystem services into a single management plan.

## Project results

- A total of 14 common land areas and 11 other upland areas were supported by Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds, totalling 84 farmers and 7 126 ha.
- All project areas formed Commonage Groups, to develop and deliver management plans on their areas and contribute to a blueprint for the formation and operation of these groups.
- All sites completed various works to improve the habitat quality on their upland area.
- All participants completed various habitat training. A model training course was developed for use in future agri-environmental schemes.



## Lessons & Recommendations

- The bad condition of upland areas is caused predominantly by many years (possibly up to 50-100) of inappropriately implemented controlled burning.
- Habitat condition and grazing patterns are interlinked and it is difficult to determine which is driving which, in most cases, without knowing the history of the site.

## Context

The unenclosed land in Ireland's Wicklow/Dublin Uplands is of high value for biodiversity and is of European conservation importance for habitats and birds. This is recognised by the designation of a substantial area of the uplands region as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA). Research carried out in the Wicklow/Dublin uplands identified the 'poor-to-bad' conservation status of the area which is linked to the decline in upland farming activity. Poor economic return is the main reason upland sheep farmers are reducing their activities.

## Objectives

The Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) project aimed to address the complex agricultural, environmental and socio-economic challenges associated with the management of common land and hill farms in the Wicklow/Dublin uplands through the development of an innovative yet practical, locally led pilot framework.

The specific objectives of the SUAS were to:

- Establish and effectively activate new management groups for common land to address the decline in the biodiversity of the uplands, the viability of the farmers who manage it, the socio-economic concerns of local communities and the wide range of issues encountered by the diverse stakeholders who enjoy and value it.
- Foster and grow farmer and stakeholder knowledge, capacity and confidence to take greater ownership of the local common land and upland agri-environmental challenges and solutions.

- Provide a proven model framework and approach to assist Irish and European upland farmers and communities facing similar economic and environmental challenges to develop their own solutions.



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## Activities

Wicklow Uplands Council assembled this Operational Group comprising a team of experts in various topics: hill production, agri-environment, ecology, rural development, water quality, conservation, public relations and administration and finance.

Adopting this multi-actor approach has helped SUAS create an innovative blueprint for future upland agri-environment schemes with a focus on a bottom-up, locally led approach.

The activities of the EIP Operation Group were:

- Training and working with farmers to build their capacity to manage and improve the habitat quality of their upland areas.
- Forming common land groups to bring shareholders together to manage their upland areas. The project would produce a blueprint for the formation, development and support of these groups.
- Producing grazing guidelines for the improvement of the habitats and identifying the supports required to reward the delivery of such grazing activity by farmers.



- Demonstrating and evaluating existing and new management activities to improve the quality of the upland habitats.
- Developing a smart phone app to be used by farmers to record their activities and to collect data.
- Developing a blueprint for a results-based upland biodiversity payment scheme.
- Producing a management handbook for common land based on the lessons learnt that will provide design guidelines for policy makers and other upland communities.

## Main results

- A total of 14 common land plots and 11 other uplands areas were supported by the project, totalling 84 farmers and 7 126 ha.
- All project areas formed Commonage Groups, to develop and deliver management plans for their areas. A blueprint for the formation and operation of these groups was developed by the project.
- All sites completed various works to improve the habitat quality on their upland area, including bracken control, controlled burning, heather and gorse mulching (using a variety of machines and by hand), drain blocking, repairs to access roads, tree planting, etc.
- Grazing management was recorded on all sites and used in conjunction with the habitat condition to develop grazing management plans for all sites. The results and costings for these actions were recorded.
- All participants completed various habitat training courses. A model training course was developed for use in future agri-environmental schemes.

## Key lessons

- The project helped to change the way in which some participants view their role in the management of the uplands, away from a sole focus on animal production towards a more holistic approach that values environmental outputs as well as animal output.

- Inappropriate burning over years (possibly up to 50-100 years) is the predominant reason for areas of the uplands being in bad condition. Repeated burning has a cumulative effect, especially where the habitat has not recovered from a previous burn. Most farmers did not know how to carry out controlled burning correctly. For the past 20 years, the argument has focused on when a burning takes place (rather than how), so now most people assume that as long as a fire is within the legal burning period, it is fine and anything outside those dates is illegal. Education is needed on all sides (farmers and environmentalists) to arrive at a consensus and an understanding about how to carry out controlled burning correctly.
- Where sites are in poor condition on the uplands, usually the grazing system is broken. There are lots of cases of overgrazing and undergrazing side by side, illustrating the difficulty of getting the management right.

### Additional information:

<https://wicklowuplands.ie/suasproject>

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