

## Best Practice examples on natural carbon sinks in agriculture

Category: Funding scheme

Field: Extensively managed grasslands



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Name	<b>Result-based Agri-Environmental Scheme “Burren Programme”</b>
Country	Ireland
Biogeographical Region	Atlantic – karst
Region	West Ireland – County Clare
Landscape/ Eco system type / protected area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parts of two counties (Clare and Galway along Ireland’s mid-western coast. A small area of the Burren is protected as a National Park, but the rest is privately owned. Its boundaries encompass five Special Areas of Conservation within the Natura 2000 Network, covering a total of 47,000 ha.</li> <li>- In addition to the limestone pavement, major landscape types, providing the habitats for the flora and fauna, include limestone heath, dry calcareous grasslands, calcareous (calcifying or petrifying) springs, the intermittent water bodies called turloughs, bogs, Cladium fens, lakes, wet grasslands, scrub and light woodland, and neutral, and farm-improved, grasslands.</li> </ul>
Size / Scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 328 farms over 23.000 ha participated in the Burren Programme as locally led agri-environmental scheme which aimed to deliver range of environmental, social and economic benefits for farmers, local community programme.</li> </ul>
Agricultural Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cattle, sheep and goats would historically have been the type of animals kept on the area of the Burren.</li> <li>- Today, most Burren farmers keep ‘suckler cows’, with an average herd size of 30-40 cows.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the Burren uplands, animals are moved to the hill pastures in winter, so called “winterage”. Calving takes place around February–April, toward the end of the winter period.</li> <li>- These cattle are kept on fertile lowland grasslands during summer before the calves are weaned, fattened and sold (usually at the local mart), with the in-calf mothers heading back onto the Burren hills in October onwards for another winter.</li> <li>- Some silage or hay may be saved during summer to be used as supplementary winter feeding (on the winterage or inside ‘slatted’ houses).</li> </ul>
Best-practice / main idea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Payment for farmers is based on reaching qualitative environmental goals, which reflect the state of biodiversity, water and soil quality.</li> </ul>
Involved Stakeholders/ Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Agri-Environment Programme was initiated by Brendan Dunford’s doctoral research, followed by a 5-year LIFE project with a wider team and supported by local organizations (Burrenbeo Trust).</li> <li>- The programme is funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine along with the European Commission. Other stakeholders included Teagasc and the National Monuments Service.</li> <li>- 328 farms participate in the programme.</li> </ul>
Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pilot scheme BurrenLIFE Project (2004-2009) with 21 farms covering over 3,000 ha.</li> <li>- Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP, 2010-2015)</li> <li>- The Burren Programme (BP, 2016-2022)- a locally led measure under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, 23,000ha</li> <li>- Since Jan 2023: National Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme – “ACRES”.</li> </ul>
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to ensure the sustainable agricultural management of high nature value farmland in the Burren.</li> <li>- to contribute to the positive management of the Burren’s landscape and cultural heritage; and</li> <li>- to contribute to improvements in water quality and water usage efficiency in the Burren region.</li> </ul>
How it works/ Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A unique feature of the BFCP-BP is the result-based payment. It started as a simple, scientifically robust, method to capture the environmental health of every field on a 1-10 scale.</li> <li>- This score, and field size (ha) were then used to calculate farmer payments: higher scores equal better environmental health, which equals more money for the farmer.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To complement this payment and to drive environmental performance, farmers could also access funds for capital works required to enable better management and outcomes.</li> <li>- Farmers decided what work they want to do and they also co-fund these works.</li> </ul>
Measures addressing the climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Burren Programme contributes significantly by keeping the health of natural habitats needed for carbon fixture in soils and vegetation.</li> </ul>
Measures addressing biodiversity, water, soil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Examples: Invasive scrub control on species-rich grasslands, habitat restoration, stone wall repair, water protection and provision, access tracks, new feeding systems (the cessation of silage feeding on many winterages and a consequent improvement in water quality, soil and habitat health.)</li> </ul>
Funding / Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Initiated by the LIFE programme BurrenLIFE Project</li> <li>- from 2010, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) of Ireland announced €3m funding over 3 years (from unspent Pillar 1 Single Farm Payment money) to expand the project's findings through the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP). This ultimately ran from 2010-2015, bringing €6m in funding to the region, significantly improving the local environment on 160 farms.</li> <li>- 2016: further expansion across the entire Burren through the Burren Programme (BP) (2016-2022.)</li> </ul>
Transferability	<p><a href="http://burrenprogramme.com/impact/reaching-out/">http://burrenprogramme.com/impact/reaching-out/</a>  <a href="http://burrenprogramme.com/burren-programme-resources/">http://burrenprogramme.com/burren-programme-resources/</a></p>
Further information	<p><a href="http://burrenprogramme.com/">http://burrenprogramme.com/</a></p>
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## Development of the Agri-Environmental Scheme

The **BurrenLIFE Project** (2004-2009) was a pilot scheme which developed a sustainable agricultural ‘blueprint’ for the region in order to conserve and restore the important habitats and to develop strong relationships and partnerships among the relevant stakeholders. (21 farms covering over 3 000 ha).

It was enlarged by the **Burren Farming for Conservation Programme** (BFCP, 2010-2015), aiming to implement this blueprint via a farmer-cantered, locally targeted, results-based approach to the sustainable agricultural management of the Burren.

The successor to these initiatives was **The Burren Programme** (BP, 2016-22) - a locally led measure under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, introduced under Article 28 of Regulation 1305/2013. This was effectively a continuation and expansion (to 23,000ha) of the BFCP.

The BP ended in December 2022, succeeded by the National Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme – ACRES.

The **ACRES** co-operation approach, managed by the Ministry of Agriculture, is available to farmers in defined high priority geographical areas in Ireland, including the Burren. Eight ‘High Nature Value’ regions in the country have been defined by a cross departmental working group as having specific environmental characteristics and farmers in those areas may engage in the new AECM through cooperation project teams. 1,300 farmers in the Burren and surrounding area now participate in the ‘ACRES Burren Aran Co-operation Project (CP)’, managed by a local team. ACRES CP was planned to be suitable for 20,000 ‘high nature value’ farmers across Ireland and, while adopting a ‘results-based’ approach, did not follow the original design or the key principles of the Burren Programme.

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## Description

The following principles are central to how Burren Programme goes about meeting its objectives of conserving the heritage, environment and communities of the Burren.

- 1) The Burren Programme is **farmer-led**. Farmers nominate and co-fund conservation actions on their own farms and are generally free to manage the land as they see fit (within the law). It is minimising the bureaucratic burden (e.g. via a simple farm plan and support for securing permissions) so that farmers can concentrate on what they do best – farming!
- 2) The Burren Programme is **results-based**. Simply put, it rewards those farmers who deliver the highest environmental benefits. The environment becomes as much a ‘product’ for the farmer as the livestock produced.
- 3) The Burren Programme is **flexible and adaptable**. Farmers are given the freedom to deliver Best-practice – Agri Environmental Scheme – effective: 24.04.25

the required outputs using their own skills, experiences and resources, as best fits their own farms and circumstances. This flexibility means that Burren Programme can respond to the different needs and situations which invariably arise, from farm to farm, and from year to year.

4) The Burren Programme is local **and practical**, focusing on works which address real needs in the Burren and which will yield agricultural and environmental benefits.



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## Funding details

### Payment for Actions – co-funding

BP farmers can submit up to five work plans over five years, each one listing a series of costed tasks designed to improve the site management and condition. Each 'job' is individually costed and co-funded by the farmer and is carried out by the farmer or a local contractor. Payment issues only when jobs are complete and to a satisfactory standard. The farmer can 'opt-out' of a planned action if he/she so chooses, ensuring maximum flexibility for the farmer. Most farms nominate a mixture of jobs to suit the needs of their land e.g. removing encroaching scrub from species-rich grassland, repairing internal walls, improving water supplies or enhancing access. Work undertaken often includes scrub control, wall repair, water provision, access provision, the purchase and installation of gates and feeding equipment and the restoration of damaged habitats.

### Payment for Results – environmental health

Every eligible field of species-rich Burren grassland and heath is assessed annually with a user-

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friendly 'habitat health' checklist. Each field receives a score between 1 and 10: all fields with a score greater than 5 have received payment but higher scores receive higher payments. This gives farmers the incentive to manage their fields in ways that will improve their scores and their payment as well.

Criteria used in the annual scoring of fields include:

- Grazing levels; Plant 'litter' (dead material) levels
- Damage around feed sites and water troughs; Damage to and around natural water sources
- Bare soil and erosion; Level of immature scrub
- Level of invasive species such as bracken and purple moor-grass; Number of weeds and agriculturally favoured plants
- Ecological integrity (winterage), Conservation value (Burren lowland grasslands)
- Any damaging activity to habitats

### **Annual workshops**

There are also mandatory annual workshops (inside and on-farm) focusing on practical farming for conservation issues including:

- Identifying Annex I (Natura2000) habitats,
- Sustainable grazing regimes,
- Approved feeding systems,
- Best practice for wall maintenance, water provision, and/or scrub removal, and
- Recognising and protecting archaeological monuments.



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## Conclusion

The Burren Programme addressed a growing polarisation of farming activity between fertile accessible lowlands which became very intensively managed with high levels of mechanical and chemical inputs, and extensive uplands where farming activity steadily declined, trends which still continue today. The environmental implications of this growing imbalance between farming and the landscape were generally very negative, particularly given the rate and scale of these changes. The Programme has pioneered a novel ‘hybrid’ approach to farming and conservation which sees farmers paid for both work undertaken and, most importantly, for the delivery of defined environmental objectives.

Author: Iris Beneš, Brod Ecological Society, 24.04.25

