Locally Led Agri Environment Scheme (LLAES) for Upland areas

Wicklow Uplands Council

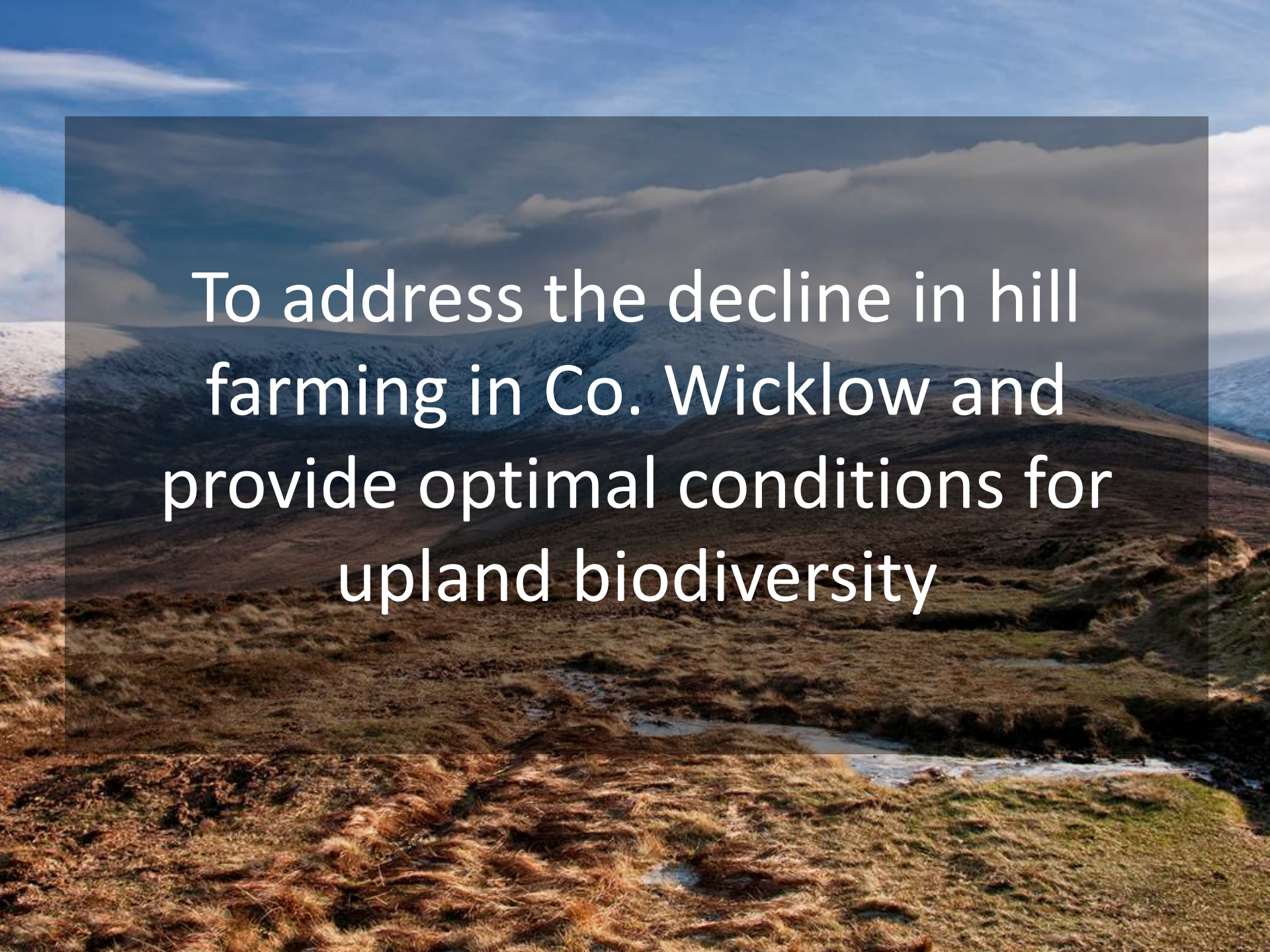
'To support the sustainable use of the Wicklow Uplands through consensus and partnership with those who live, work and recreate there'

Background

- The unenclosed lands in the Wicklow Uplands are almost all of value for biodiversity and much is of European importance
- Hill farming in Wicklow and across Ireland is in decline
- There is a correlation between this decline and a decline in biodiversity in upland areas.

Decline in hill farming

- New Regulations; from E.U.
- Decoupling
- Restrictive habitat management
- An aging farming population
- Difficult to make a living and support a family

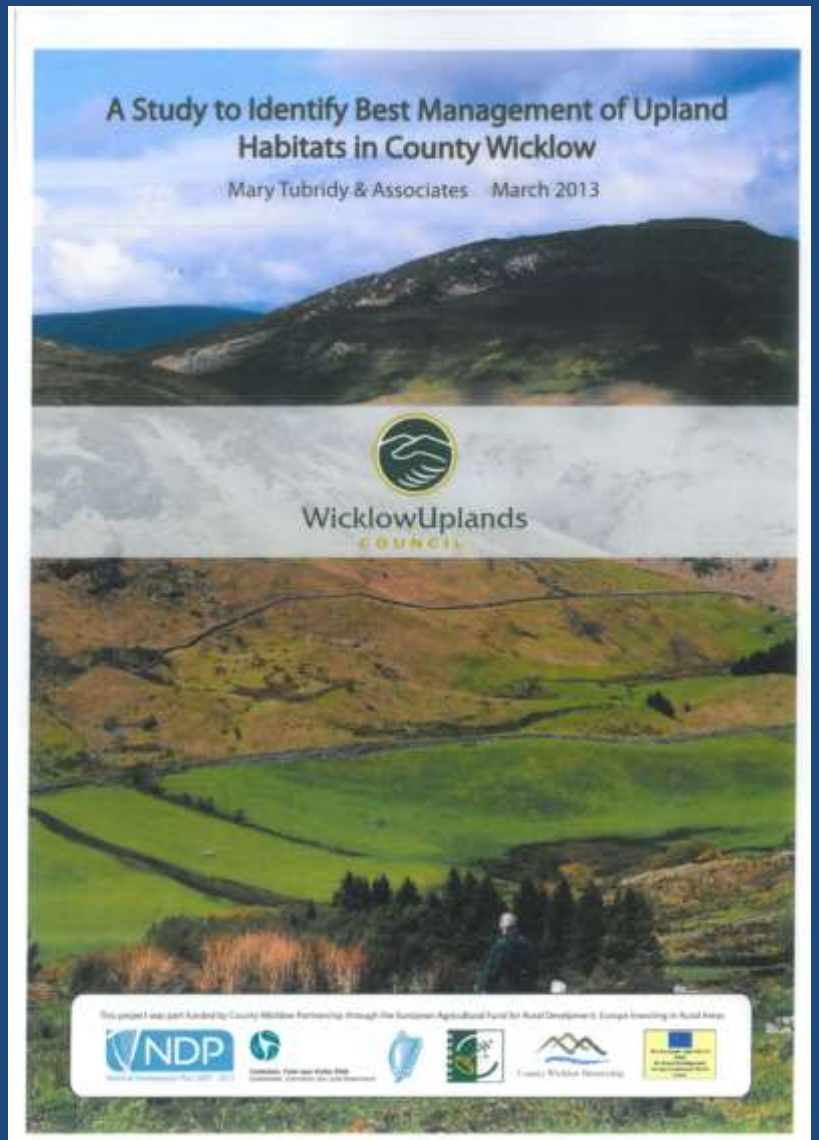

To address the decline in hill farming in Co. Wicklow and provide optimal conditions for upland biodiversity

Aims

- To enhance and improve the condition of upland habitats through hill farming, particularly within designated areas

- Healthy upland habitats have a variety of benefits all stakeholders

Study to Identify Best Management of Upland Habitats in County Wicklow



- Key recommendations included; the need for a sustainable uplands agri-environmental scheme, research and proposed local and national policy changes
- Following the publication of this report WUC worked towards the recommendations of the report.
- Ongoing consultation with the Dept. of the Environment throughout the development of the Rural Development Programme
- Focusing on Provision for a locally led agri environmental scheme under the RDP

Vegetation Management Project

- A number of proactive projects including:
  - Lobbying for a change in burning dates of upland vegetation
  - Walsh Fellowship Thesis ‘To investigate the socioeconomic aspects of upland hill sheep farming in Wicklow’
  - Commissioning an Inventory of Biodiversity for the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands

Lobbying for an extension of the vegetation management season

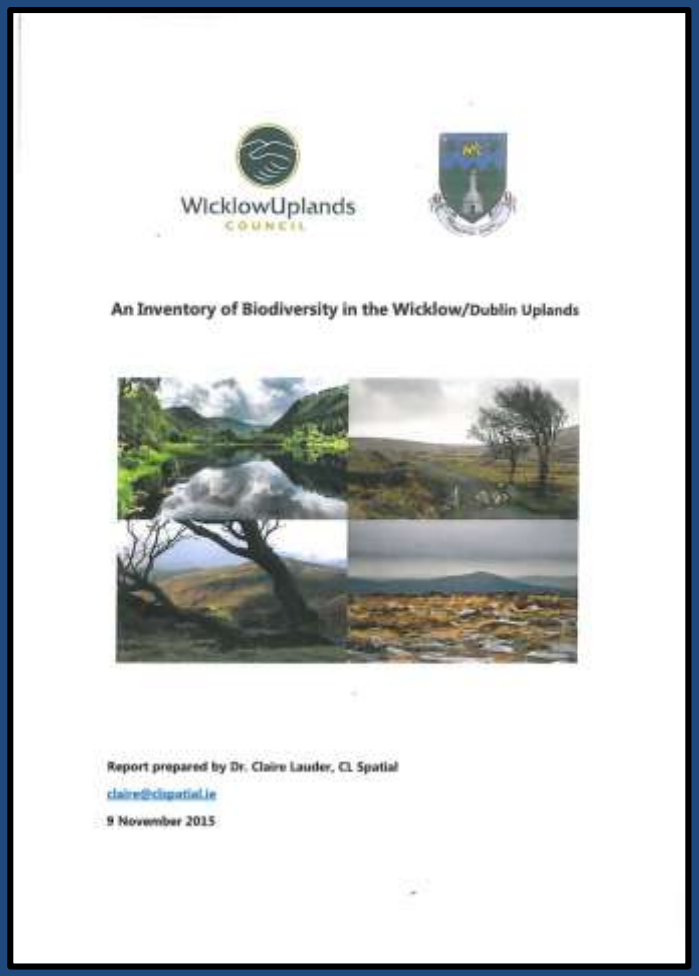
- Very restrictive for effective management
- Need for controlled rotational burning, providing a mosaic of habitat structures
- Overgrown hills are dangerous for those who live work and recreate in the uplands due to potential wildfires
- Current season out of line with season in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales


Legislation is out of line with best management practice and therefore has resulted in a decline in hill farming, an increase in overgrown habitats and a decrease in biodiversity

Decline in Biodiversity

- Overgrown vegetation does not provide sufficient habitat structure for a range of already threatened species
  e.g. Red Grouse, Hen Harrier and the Golden Eagle

An Inventory of Biodiversity in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands



- Commissioned in 2015 to establish a clear baseline for biodiversity in the Wicklow/Dublin uplands
- Project Outputs
  - An indicative habitat map of the study area
  - Record of all threatened and protected species in the area
- These were produced by collating all available existing data sets.

Burren Farming for Conservation Scheme

- Internationally recognised area for it's wealth and diversity of heritage, largely designated under Natura 2000
- A study funded by the EU LIFE programme (Burren LIFE), recognised that farming practices were essential for conservation of good habitats in the area
- Key feature of the scheme is the partnership among stakeholders (N.P.W.S., Teagasc and the Burren Farmers Association).

Burren Farming for Conservation Scheme

- Results based scheme
- Rewards for delivering environmental benefits and producing biodiversity
- Rewards are divided by:
  1. Payment for actions – a list of actions nominated by farmers
  2. Payment for results – habitat health checklist

Developing a LLAES

- Consultations with the Dept of Agriculture
- Wicklow Uplands Council lobbied for an LLAES for Upland areas to support upland farmers
- There is now provision for a number of LLAESs under the new RDP
  1. The Burren
  2. Hen Harrier and Freshwater Pearl Mussel
  3. Upland Areas

Developing a LLAES

- Follow the approach used in the Burren with payments on the production of biodiversity
- Payments in addition to those already available under existing agri-environment schemes e.g. GLAS
- Farmers supported by an advisory service

Increase Biodiversity

- Improved, integrated vegetation management system
- Controlled Burning, swiping, grazing and practical vegetation management methods
- Ensure a productive pastoral economy while improving the biodiversity of upland habitats

Current Burren LLAES Structure

- Operational since early 2016
- Programme based on actions undertaken by farmers and performance reaching environmental goals
- Delivered by a locally based specialist intermediary layer
- Programme overseen by a steering group

Payments

Sample of potential scores and payments for management of winterage grazing habitats							
Per hectare payment	Score 10	Score 9	Score 8	Score 7	Score 6	Score 5	Score 4,3,2,1,0
0-40ha	€180	€135	€96	€84	€72	€60*	-
41-80ha	€90	€68	€48	€42	€36	€30*	-
81-120ha	€45	€34	€24	€21	€18	€15*	-
>121ha	€23	€17	€12	€11	€9	€8*	-

Potential for further investments

- Funding also available for a number of specific eligible environmentally sensitive farm investments eg:
  - Habitat restoration
  - Repairing stone walls and gateways
  - Keeping tracks and trails surfaced

Importance of locally led

- A ‘one size fits all’ approach won’t work
- Schemes need to be tailored to an individual area
  - Local communities are the best people to understand their area
  - Each area has specific wildlife species which needs to be taken into account

Success of the Scheme

- Based on the experience in the Burren we know it can work
- The scheme has been developed from the bottom up in consultation with farming groups
- Farmers are waiting anxiously for it
- It will be rolled out in 2017
- If the scheme works as planne


‘The scheme is not about returning to the past but looking at how hill farming can better fit into a modern farming system, while maintaining the mountain in optimal condition for biodiversity’