

Tom Presentation Script:

1. Opening Slide:

Introduce yourself as a farmer, Vice Chairman of Wicklow Uplands Council, Wicklow IFA among others!

Next Slide

2. Outline:

I have been asked to present a case study today based on the experiences of Wicklow Uplands Council and farmers in Wicklow

I will introduce you to Wicklow Uplands Council, farming in Wicklow, how the Uplands Council has supported farmers and what is the future for farmers like me.

Next Slide

3. The Wicklow Uplands;

To begin I would like to explain where the Wicklow uplands are. The Wicklow uplands are the largest upland area in Ireland, located on the East Coast of Ireland immediately beside Dublin, our capital city. The uplands are characterised by small rural villages, largely dependent on farming

Next Slide

4. Wicklow Uplands Council;

It was established in 1997 by a group of local people in response to growing concerns about developments affecting the sustainability of the uplands. The mission of Wicklow Uplands Council is to support the sustainable use of the Wicklow uplands in consensus and partnership with those who live, work and recreate there.

Next Slide

5. Representation of the shared interests of the uplands;

The Uplands Council is an NGO with charitable status. It has a four panel structure aimed to represent the shared interests of the Wicklow uplands. There is a large board of 27 directors who are elected annually at our AGM.

The panels are: Farming and Landowners, Environment and Recreation, Economic and Tourism and Community along with a number of co-options.

Next Slide

6. Projects;

The organisation has worked on a number of projects over the years to bring value to the people who live, work and recreate in the area. One of the key ongoing projects is that of upland vegetation management.

Next Slide

7. Uplands Farming in Co Wicklow;

Sheep farming is one of the dominant agricultural systems in the uplands. Hill sheep farming in particular was traditionally a key feature of the Wicklow Uplands. The activities of sheep grazing the hillside along with habitat management carried out by landowners kept the hills in good agricultural and environmental condition. Unfortunately there has been a sharp decline in hill sheep farming in the past decade. This decline has been attributed to changes in legislation and designation of upland habitats. These changes made it more difficult for landowners to effectively manage their habitats.

The reduction in farming activities due to restrictions has led to a decline in the upland habitats and biodiversity.

Next Slide

8. Upland Vegetation Management

This is where Wicklow Uplands Council has been working to support upland habitats and farmers through a vegetation management project.

The project began was initiated in 2011 using a grassroots approach working with all upland stakeholders.

Most importantly there was strong farmer participation in this group, with 11 upland farmers on the working group.

There was a series of public meetings and events over a two year period to come up with a solution.

It was important that the group liaised with other farmers across the countries that were having similar issues. They also liaised with the statutory bodies and local authorities which was important that their work was recognised.

A major step-back of the group was a lack of scientific backing as research on the issues was limited.

Next Slide

9. A Study to Identify Best Management of Upland Habitats in County Wicklow

As research into the management issues of upland habitats was limited, Wicklow Uplands Council commissioned this study in 2013.

The study aimed to use good science and collaboration to identify best management of these areas with the optimal balance of farming and biodiversity.

The report published a number of key recommendations including:

The need for targeted support for upland farmers through a sustainable upland agri-environment scheme

The need for the dates of the Irish burning season to be brought back in line with UK and Northern Ireland season and supported through the targeted scheme

The establishment of burning management groups

Further research on the socio-economics of upland farming and trials to monitor the effects on biodiversity

Next Slide

10. 'Farmers Attributes, Management Practices and Attitudes Associated with commonage use'

As it had been identified that more information was needed regarding the socio-economics of upland farming a Masters of Agricultural Science research project was carried out between 2014 and 2015. The study was supervised by Teagasc, Irelands Agricultural Advisory Body and University College Dublin.

The study aimed to identify how to keep upland habitats in good agricultural and environmental condition through hill sheep farming

It identified that poorer agricultural productivity was a key driver in the shift from hill farmers. This highlighted the need for additional support to keep farmers in a hill farm system.

The study also identified key socio-economic impacts of the decline in upland farming.

Next Slide

11. An Inventory of Biodiversity in the Wicklow/Dublin uplands.

This report was commissioned by Wicklow Uplands Council in 2015 to establish a clear baseline for biodiversity in the region.

The inventory identifies key upland species and provides an indicative habitat map of the area.

The inventory also aimed to identify where there were gaps in knowledge for upland species.

I have a copy of the report if anybody would like to view it and it also available online on our website www.wicklowuplands.ie

Next Slide

12. Influencing and developing policy

So how has Wicklow Uplands Council developed on this research?

The 2013 Study to Identify Best Management of Upland Habitats in County Wicklow was launched by the then Minister for Agriculture Simon Coveney at our 2013 AGM. The minister welcomed the report and recommendations as a very positive step for upland farming

It was subsequently presented to the Government's joint committee for Agriculture later that year.

Wicklow Uplands Council then lobbied for the provision of a locally led scheme for the uplands to be included in new Rural Development Plan. The scheme would be modelled on the Burren Farming for Conservation Scheme in Co Clare.

The scheme in the Burren demonstrated how local farmers had the knowledge to provide the best conditions for both farming and biodiversity when provided with the right supports.

Thankfully provision was made for locally led schemes under the Rural Development Programme. These are among the first of their kind among all EU rural development programmes.

Next Slide

13. Led Agri-Environment Schemes

To give a little more detail on what these schemes are.

Based on the experiences in the Burren it was recognised that top-down management was not working for farmers or biodiversity. It recognised that the bottom-up approach was the way to achieve sustainable results. Local knowledge is needed to develop a scheme which works for everyone involved.

As the Burren had successfully demonstrated the Farming for Conservation Scheme had worked for them they now also have Locally Led Scheme tailored for the region

A further 2 schemes have been developed and are now underway for the preservation of the freshwater pearl mussel and the hen harrier.

There was a call for applications for other locally led schemes including upland areas in December 2016. Wicklow Uplands Council worked with local stakeholders, including statutory bodies, in preparing an application for the competitive process using the existing research.

Given the level of research in Wicklow to date we are well positioned to run the one of the 1st upland schemes in the Country.

Next Slide

14. Led Agri-Environment Schemes

To give a very basic outline of the proposed scheme will entail.

It will work by providing farmers payments for services provided. Such payments will sit on top of CAP funding.

However these payments will be for works carried out. These works will also promote upland habitat quality

A plan will be developed between farmers and a farm planner, outlining specific tasks and duties.

Most importantly it is the farmer who will decide what tasks to carry out. They are not forced to participate in the scheme.

There are no penalties involved with the scheme, if works are completed in the agreed timeframe there are no payments. It is widely felt that fear of penalties would discourage participation

Tasks will include; increased shepherding and targeting grazing, the erection of temporary fencing, drain and path maintenance etc.

Next Slide

15. So where too for farming in the future?

The experience in Wicklow has shown that farmers need to be involved in the decision making process from the very beginning.

The bottom up approach is the best way to achieve long term sustainability.

We have no guarantee that Wicklow will secure a locally led scheme but Wicklow Uplands Council will continue to work to support local farmers, bring consensus among the diverse interests of the uplands and bring their voices to the Government

What is guaranteed is that if small scale farmers are not supported and encouraged to remain farmers our local communities, habitats and landscape will drastically change

Next Slide

The next couple of slides will present the potential scenario