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Nature Friendly Farming in Northern Ireland

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1 Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the concept of 'Nature Friendly Farming' and its application in Northern Ireland, within the context of the 2014-20 CAP programme period, its associated programmes/schemes and future agricultural policy development.

In addition, the paper identifies those areas of Northern Ireland which are currently subject to some form of protective designation that may either maintain or enhance environment/habitat. It also provides an overview of what the main designations cover.

2 Background

The actual origins of the 'nature friendly farming' terminology are hard to definitively determine. There are undoubtedly parallels with certain features of the sustainable farming concept that has been in the lexicon since the early 1900s. The use of sustainable agriculture terminology became more common in the 1980s and the term has been defined by the OECD as follows:

Sustainable agriculture is agricultural production that is economically viable and does not degrade the environment over the long run.

Definitions differ as to the period over which sustainability is intended to be achieved; whether sustainability should relate only to localised effects on the environment or also to effects on the environment caused by the production of farm inputs; and whether the environment in this context should be defined only to include the physical environment (soil, water, plants and animals) or also the environment created by agriculture, such as landscape amenities¹.

The specific ‘nature friendly farming’ terminology however seems to have its origins in work developed in the mid 2010s. A Friends of the Earth policy position paper produced in 2019², references a 2017 scientific paper³ on the concept of ‘ecological intensification’ which further references the work of Bommarco et al. (2013)⁴ and Tittonell (2014)⁵. Reflecting on the work of Bommarco et al. (2013) and Tittonell (2014), the 2017 paper makes the following observation:

Ecological intensification, as defined by Bommarco et al. (2013) and Tittonell (2014), involves actively managing farmland to increase the intensity of the ecological processes that support production, such as biotic pest regulation, nutrient cycling and pollination. It means making smart use of nature's functions and services, at field and landscape scales, to enhance agricultural productivity, and reduce reliance on agrochemicals and the need for further land-use conversion.

The Nature Friendly Farm Network⁶ was established across the UK in 2018 and has members within Northern Ireland. The Network has a broad objective of *championing a way of farming which is sustainable and good for nature and by so doing, ensuring our countryside is productive and bursting with wildlife*. The Network’s manifesto highlights the network’s priorities as follows:

- *Our network will engender a strong community which will provide a strong voice for regenerative nature friendly farming;*
- *We believe agriculture needs to be profitable and sustainable, and farmers should receive adequate payments for undertaking environmental and nature friendly activities;*
- *We are committed to demonstrate to the wider public what farmers can do to help wildlife, the environment and climate whilst still producing plentiful quality produce;*
- *We will seek to build markets for nature friendly farming products;*

¹ [Glossary of statistical terms, OECD, OECD website, 15 April 2021](#)

² [Why supporting nature friendly farming is essential to productivity, Friends of the Earth policy position, 16 April 2019](#)

³ [Anikó Kovács-Hostyánszki, Anahí Espindola, Adam J. Vanbergen, Josef Settele, Claire Kremen, Lynn V. Dicks, Ecological intensification to mitigate impacts of conventional intensive land use on pollinators and pollination, Ecology Letters, Volume 20, Issue 5, May 2017, Pages 673-689](#)

⁴ Bommarco, R., Kleijn, D. & Potts, S. (2013). Ecological intensification: harnessing ecosystem services for food security. *Trends Ecol. Evol.*, 28, 230–238.

⁵ Tittonell, P. (2014). Ecological intensification of agriculture—sustainable by nature. *Curr. Opin. Environ. Sustain.*, 8, 53–61

⁶ [Nature Friendly Farming Network website, 15 April 2021](#)

- *We will encourage transparency in food supply chains to allow people to make informed sustainable food choices;*
- *We will demonstrate to decision makers the value of sustainable nature friendly farming to ensure there is support within government and the supply chain;*
- *We are committed to securing farming policies that support wildlife, sustainable agriculture and fairness for farmers;*
- *We will work to end damaging policies and practices and secure the multiple benefits of sustainable nature friendly farming;*
- *We will build a knowledge base, share research and offer advice, support, and training;*
- *We will explore innovative and improved ways of achieving agronomic, environmental and social benefits, whilst retaining valued aspects of tradition.*

3 Conservation in Northern Ireland – background

Protection and conservation measures, in the form of various types of designation, have been put in place for approximately 7% of Northern Ireland's land and 10% of marine environments through a range of EU and national initiatives⁷. The aim of these protection and designation measures is to try and halt biodiversity loss by protecting Northern Ireland (NI) species and habitats.

According to NI's Biodiversity Strategy, there are around 20,000 species found on land, soil, air and water in NI. Some of NI's species are unique to NI and not found anywhere else in the UK including the Irish Hare, Irish Damselfly, Irish Whitebeam, Cryptic Wood White and Pollan⁸. The State of Nature Report (2019) attributes NI's unique fauna to its geological diversity with internationally significant areas of blanket bog, large inland water bodies (Lough Neagh being the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles which alone supports around 100,000 wintering water birds, myriad lakes, fens and raised bogs), and 650km of coastline, sea lough and estuaries.⁹

That being said, biodiversity loss has been a major concern for NI over the years. According to the Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy for NI, this is due to its poor performance in respect of European Priority Habitats, with:

...only one of 49 habitats at favourable status. Furthermore, 36% of NI priority habitats and 31% of European protected species have declined between 2002 and 2012.¹⁰

⁷ DOENI, Valuing Nature , A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020, <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/biodiversity-strategy-northern-ireland-2020-0>

⁸ State of Nature Report UK (2019) <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/> p.68

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Sited in the SALMS (p.26) taken from Evidence to Opportunity: A Second Assessment of the State of Northern Ireland's Environment (DOE, 2013)

According to the State of Nature Report (2019)¹¹, the dominance of farmland in NI (around 75% of land) and changes in land management have had wide-ranging effects on biodiversity:

- The large scale move from mixed farming to pastoral (e.g. >40% of land comprises grassland) has led to the loss of semi-natural habitats, overwintering stubbles and hedgerows.
- Due to agriculture, NI produces 12% of the UK's ammonia emissions, while only representing 6% of the land area. It has the greatest percentage of nitrogen-sensitive habitats exceeding critical ammonia levels in the UK.
- Large areas, particularly in County Armagh and County Down, suffer from excessive levels of nitrogen pollution and less than one-third of monitored river water bodies in Northern Ireland were at or above a good standard in 2015.

4 Conservation in Northern Ireland - current situation

According to the latest Department for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Environmental Statistics report for 2020:

- In 2019/20, the area of terrestrial protected sites under favourable management in Northern Ireland was recorded as 204.83km². This is an increase from the baseline year for PfG reporting (2015/16).
- The area of marine protected sites under favourable management in Northern Ireland was recorded as 115 square kilometres in 2019/20, an increase from the baseline year for PfG reporting (2015/16).
- 11% of species in NI have been classified as threatened with extinction from the island of Ireland as a whole. This is the same as Scotland with 100%, England 13% and Wales 8%.¹²
- Between 1994 and 2018, the estimated total wild bird population has increased by 42%. However, the total wetland bird population is estimated to have decreased by 6% between 1994/95 and 2017/18.
- At the UK level, populations of farmland birds have more than halved on average since 1970, showing a decline more than any other habitat¹³. However, in Scotland, they have shown an average increase since 1990.¹⁴ The State of Nature Report (2019) makes reference to the decline in farmland birds in NI in general. The UK State of Birds Report states that seed eating farmland birds, such as the Linnet have shown a 52% decrease from 2008-2018¹⁵. The Sustainable Agricultural Land

¹¹ State of Nature Report UK (2019) <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/> P.71

¹² State of Nature Report UK (2019) <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/> P.69/70

¹³ State of Nature Report UK (2019) <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/> p.18 and 20

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ RSPB (2020) State of UK Birds Report p.60 <https://www.rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/centre-for-conservation-science/state-of-the-uks-birds/>

Management Strategy states that in NI, farmland birds (such as yellowhammer, curlew, cuckoo and skylark), have shown a 60% to 90% decline¹⁶.

- In 2019/20, 167 hectares of new woodland was created by private landowners supported under the Rural Development Programme.
- Agri-environment schemes encourage farmers and landowners to manage their land to benefit the environment. At the end of 2019, 46,000 hectares of land (5% of farmland) in Northern Ireland were under agri-environment scheme agreement¹⁷.

5 Protected sites within Northern Ireland

There are a number of different conservation and protection sites in NI provided under EU legislation and international agreements. The following table provides examples of different sites in NI, the legislation and numbers.

Table 1: examples of conservation and protection sites in Northern Ireland

Designation type	Brief description	Legislation/law	Numbers (as of 31 March 2020 ¹⁸)
Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)	Land declared by NIEA as of special scientific interest because of the flora or fauna or geological features. ¹⁹	Provided under the Environment Order (Northern Ireland) 2002, Part IV.	394 sites across 111,159 hectares.
Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)	Sites designated because of a possible threat to the special habitats or species which they contain and to provide increased protection.	Provided under the EU Habitats Directive and transposed through the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995.	57 sites across 85,900 hectares
Special Protection Areas (SPAs)	These are areas identified as internationally important for breeding, over-wintering and migrating birds.	Provided under the Birds Directive and transposed through the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995.	17 sites across 114,600 hectares.
Ramsar sites	Areas of wetland and waterfowl.	The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention) is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. NI is a signatory as part of the UK.	21 sites covering 77,700 hectares

¹⁶ Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy (p.26), based on [State of Nature Report \(2016\)](#)

¹⁷ DAERA (2020) The Statistical Review of NI Agriculture 2019 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward> p.5

¹⁸ DAERA (2020) Environmental Statistics Report p.33 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-environmental-statistics-report-2020>

¹⁹ DAERA [online] ASSIS Introduction. <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/introduction-assis>

Designation type	Brief description	Legislation/law	Numbers (as of 31 March 2020 ¹⁸)
Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)	<p>An MPA is a clearly defined area that contributes to the conservation and improvement of the marine environment in the NI inshore region. It makes up a network of other UK MPAs that contribute to the overall conservation of the UK marine area.</p> <p>MPAs may take the form of:</p> <p>Marine SACs (SACs with marine components)</p> <p>Marine SPAs (SPAs with marine components)</p> <p>Coastal ASSIs (ASSIs with marine features)</p> <p>Marine Coastal Zones (MCZs) - these are designated to safeguard vulnerable or unique marine species and habitats of national importance in the NI inshore region.</p> <p>Ramsar sites- as described above</p>	<p>The Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 requires DAERA to establish a network of MPAs in the Northern Ireland inshore region.</p> <p>Habitats and Birds Directives, transposed by the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 for Marine SACs and SPAs.</p> <p>Ramsar Convention for Ramsar sites.</p>	<p>Marine SACs – 7²⁰</p> <p>Marine SPAs – 9²¹</p> <p>Coastal ASSIs - 20²²</p> <p>MCZs - 5²³</p> <p>Ramsar – 7 that contribute to MPA network²⁴</p> <p>Total MPAs – approx. 48</p>

5.1 Natura 2000 designations

The EU network called [Natura 2000](#) comprised both SACs and SPAs. However, following Brexit, SACs and SPAs in the UK no longer form part of the EU's Natura 2000 network. Instead, they contribute to a UK national site network on land and at sea, including both the inshore and offshore marine areas.

According to DAERA, UK Government Ministers have confirmed that the UK's former Natura 2000 sites in the national site network will continue to be the UK's contribution to the Emerald Network.²⁵

²⁰ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/european-marine-sites-marine-special-areas-conservation-and-special-protection-areas>

²¹ Ibid

²² <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/coastal-areas-special-scientific-interest>

²³ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-conservation-zones>

²⁴ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-ramsar-sites>

²⁵ DAERA [online] *European Marine Sites - Marine Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas*.

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/european-marine-sites-marine-special-areas-conservation-and-special-protection-areas>

6 Conservation and farming

NI's landscape is dominated by agricultural land, which, according to DAERA statistics, makes up around 75% of the total area²⁶. Agri-environment schemes represent the main policy mechanism linking conservation measures with agriculture and addressing losses in farmland wildlife.²⁷

For example, the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) encourages environmental farming practices to enhance habitat and biodiversity conservation and requires the management of Natura 2000 conservation sites (SACs and SPAs).²⁸

According to the State of Nature Report (2019), the impact of AES on biodiversity has shown mixed results:

Assessments of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas scheme identified no benefits for the botanical diversity on moorland or grassland habitats²⁹, but positive effects for some mammals³⁰. Targeted prescriptions, through the Countryside Management Scheme, have been shown to have a positive effect for some priority farmland birds³¹.

The UK State of Nature Report (2019) states that the decline of farmland nature throughout the UK is linked to farming and land management intensification. However, farmers, through government funding, are adopting wildlife friendly farming³². For example, in NI, the State of Nature Report NI (2016) reports how the RSPB is helping to create 'wildlife friendly' farmland and farming which has had the following effect on farmland birds:

To date, we have proven that by introducing simple conservation measures on farmland we can dramatically improve conditions for farmland birds. For example, we have seen an overall increase of 79% in yellowhammer numbers in East County Down on farms that received the most conservation management advice³³.

²⁶ DAERA (2020) The Statistical Review of NI Agriculture 2019 <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward> p.6

²⁷ State of Nature Report (2019) p.71

²⁸ DAERA Environmental Farming Scheme [Environmental Farming Scheme](#)

²⁹ McEvoy PM, *et al.* (2006). The Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme (ESA) in Northern Ireland: ten years of agri environment monitoring. *Biol. Env. Proc. Roy. Ir. Ac*, 106: 413–423. In Hayhow, DB *et al* State of Nature Partnership (2019) *State of Nature UK 2019*. (p.71) Available at <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

³⁰ Reid N, *et al.* (2007). Mammals and agrienvironment schemes: hare haven or pest paradise? *J. Appl. Ecol*, 44: 1200–1208. In State of Nature Report (2019) p.71 <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/>

³¹ Colhoun K, *et al.* (2017). Agri-environment scheme enhances breeding populations of some priority farmland birds in Northern Ireland. *Bird study*, 64(4): 545–556 in State of Nature Report p.71 <https://nbn.org.uk/stateofnature2019/reports/>

³² Hayhow, DB *et al* State of Nature Partnership (2019) *State of Nature UK 2019*.(p.7) Available at <https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf>

³³ State of Nature Report NI (2016) p.8

7 The Common Agricultural Policy 2014-20

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which came into operation in 1962, has provided direct and indirect financial support to agriculture, and increasingly to the wider rural economy, through the mechanism of rural development.

The CAP has been the key driver for agricultural policy within Northern Ireland since 1962, and within this context has also directly and indirectly affected our natural environment and wildlife.

Over the years the CAP has gone through a series of reforms with the most recent being completed in advance of the latest 2014-20 programme period, which has also turned out to be the last iteration of the CAP within the UK due to Brexit.

The 2014-20 CAP within Northern Ireland had a number of elements which were either designed to directly deliver environmental/habitat protection or enhancement, or did so indirectly. Table 1 below provides a brief overview of the main provisions in relation to farming. It should be noted that these supports were delivered through either Pillar 1 or Pillar 2 of the CAP. In simple terms these Pillars are defined as follows:

- Pillar 1 (shaded blue in table) – direct payments to farmers;
- Pillar 2 – wider rural development provisions (many also available to farmers).

It should be further noted that the supports identified within table 1 built upon programmes delivered within the period preceding the 2014-20 CAP, such as the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme launched in 1988 and the Countryside Management Scheme launched in 2000³⁴.

Table 2 : 2014-20 CAP measures that relate to environmental/habitat protection within Northern Ireland

Measure/support	Overview as it relates to environmental/habitat protection
Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) ³⁵ – Pillar 1 funding	<p>An annual direct payment made to ‘active’ farmers providing they meet a series of environmental cross compliance requirements³⁶.</p> <p>In particular, farmers are required to meet a series of Statutory Management Rules (SMRs) and Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) obligations. The following SMRs and GAEC requirements are worthy of note in relation to the protection of nature and wildlife:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMR 1 – Protection of water against nitrates pollution; • SMR 2 – Conservation of wild birds; • SMR 3 - Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna (designed to conserve land designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC)) ; • GAEC 7 - GAEC 7: Retention of Landscape Features.

³⁴ <http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/countryside-management-scheme-2007-2013-information-booklet>

³⁵ [Basic Payment Scheme Guide, DAERA, 2021](#)

³⁶ <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/2021%20Cross-Compliance%20Verifiable%20Standards%20-%20Summary%20Version%20-%20revised%2022%2002%2021.PDF>

	<p>BPS recipients also have to meet a CAP 'greening' requirement depending on the nature of their farming activity but the impacts have not been that significant here due to the fact that the greening impacts are greatest for arable land, whilst our land is mainly permanent pasture. Under Greening rules, farmers with more than 15 ha of arable land must have an area equivalent to at least 5% of that land in a so called Ecological Focus Area (EFA)</p>
<p>Young Farmer Scheme (YFS)³⁷ – Pillar 1 funding</p>	<p>Provides an annual top-up to the BPS to those farmers who meet its eligibility requirements- top-up payment limited to 90 hectares. The CAP Regulations defined "young farmers" as natural persons who are setting up for the first time an agricultural holding as Head of Holding, or who have already set up such a holding during the 5 years preceding the first submission of an application under the BPS and who are no more than 40 years of age in the year of submission of their first application for the BPS.</p> <p>Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.</p>
<p>Environmental Farming Scheme³⁸ – Pillar 2 funding</p>	<p>Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) is a voluntary scheme designed to support farmers and land managers to carry out environmentally beneficial farming practices on agricultural land. EFS agreements have a five year duration. Farmers receive annual payments for making EFS provisions eg Provision of winter feed crop for wild birds – payment of £590 per hectare.</p> <p>The aims of the Scheme are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restore, preserve and enhance biodiversity; • improve water management and water quality; • reduce soil erosion and improve soil management; • foster carbon conservation and sequestration in agriculture; and • reduce greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions from agriculture <p>The EFS is made up of three levels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EFS (W), a Wider Level Scheme aimed at delivering benefits across the wider countryside outside of environmentally designated areas; • EFS (H), a Higher Level Scheme primarily aimed at site specific environmental improvements at strategically important sites and for priority habitats and species; and • EFS (G), a Group Level Scheme to support co-operative work by farmers in specific areas, such as river catchments, or commonages. EFS (G) is in pilot stage. <p>Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.</p>
<p>Forestry Expansion Scheme³⁹ – Pillar 2 funding</p>	<p>The Forest Expansion Scheme is for new woodland planting of 3 hectares and larger. All woodlands that comply with the UK Forestry Standard are eligible for support. Successful applicants will receive up to 100% of eligible establishment costs and where eligible annual premia for a 10-year period.</p>

³⁷ [Guide to Young Farmers' Payment /Regional Reserve , DAERA, 2021](#)

³⁸ [A Guide to Environmental Farming Scheme: For agreements commencing 01 January 2020 and 01 January 2021\), DAERA 2020](#)

³⁹ [Forestry Grant Schemes Information Booklet 2020/21, DAERA](#)

	Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.
Forest Protection Scheme ⁴⁰ - Pillar 2 funding	Support for woodland owners affected by Chalara ash dieback - aimed at forestry grant scheme agreement holders to assist their management of woodland affected by Ash dieback. Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.
Woodland Investment Grant ⁴¹ – Pillar 2 funding	Grant support for sustainable forest management including the improvement of the environmental value of woodlands and building resilience to climate change through replanting. Support may be made available for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woodland habitats and species - to support operations that will benefit priority habitats or species; • Restructuring woodland - to improve the ecological and environmental value of woodlands through the regeneration of forests by replanting. The aim is to encourage species diversity and improve the resilience of forests to climate change. Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.
Small Woodland Grant Scheme ⁴² - Pillar 2 funding	Supports woodland creation on agricultural land and non-agricultural land. Designed to increase scope for the integration of a woodland component into an existing farm. Scheme encouraged the creation of new native woodland which will contribute to biodiversity, carbon sequestration, improving air, soil and water quality and improved public amenity value. Support available for establishment, annual premia and stock fencing. Same as BPS with regards to cross compliance requirements in terms of SMRs and GAEC.

8 Distribution of existing selected environmental/habitat protection or enhancement designated land within Northern Ireland

The following map shows the location of Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in NI and how they correlate with land under Environmental Farming Scheme agreement. The map also includes forest created under the 2014-20 CAP forest expansion scheme.

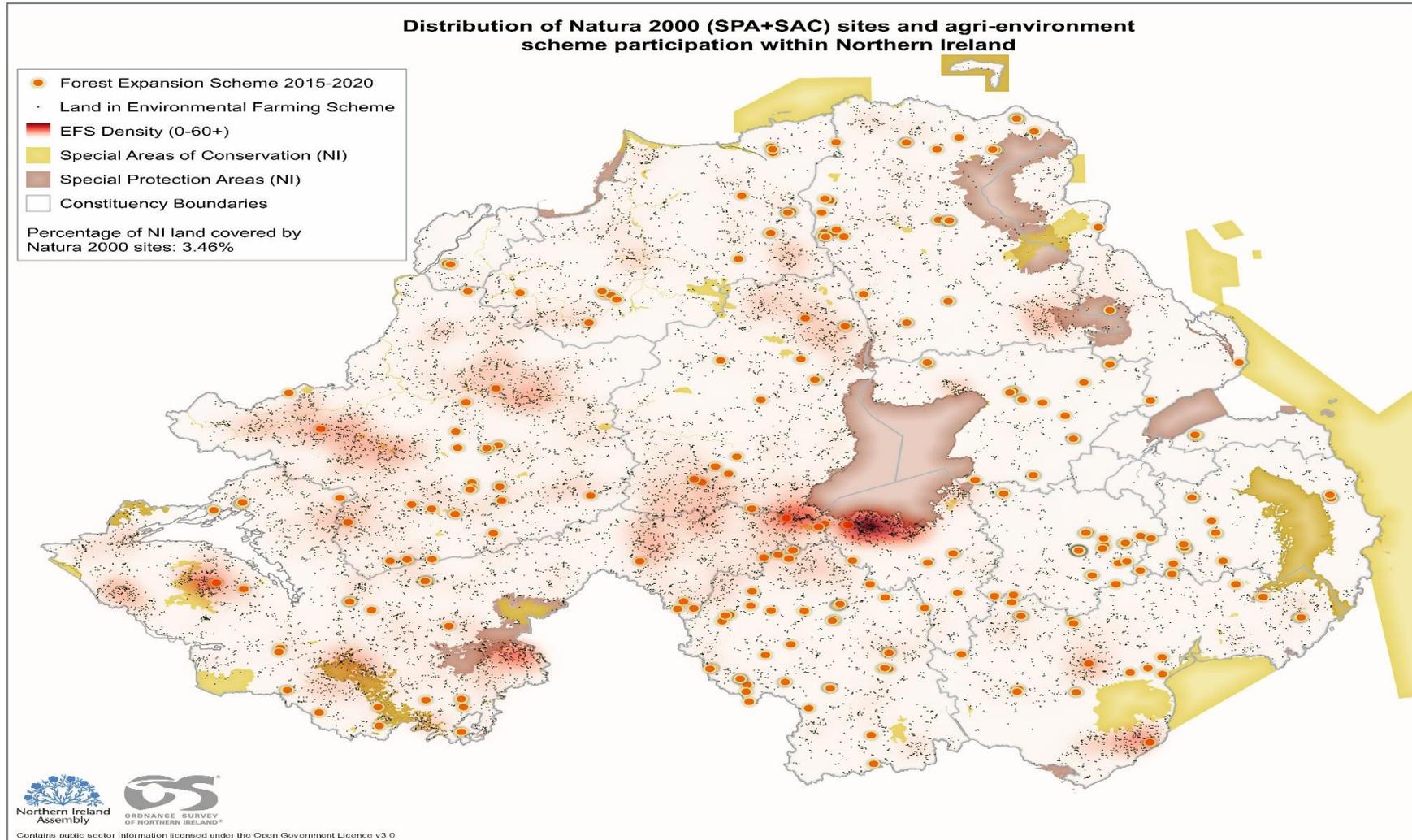
With regard to the data in figure 1 relating to land under Environmental Farming Scheme agreement, it should be noted that the darker red patches on the map indicate those areas with a greater concentration of this type of land. Maps showing the distribution of all of the features in figure 1 at a more detailed individual constituency level are presented in Appendix 1 of this paper.

⁴⁰ ibid

⁴¹ ibid

⁴² ibid

Figure 1: Distribution of Natura 2000 (SPA+SAC) sites and agri-environment scheme participation within Northern Ireland



5 Future Agricultural Policy

Since the UK formally left the EU on the 31st December 2020, Northern Ireland, in line with the other UK devolved administrations, has been actively engaged in developing its agricultural policy outside the provisions of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

As part of this process, 2021 has been recognised as a transitional year, meaning that there has been very little change to the existing provisions that had been developed under the 2014-20 CAP. In effect, 2021 is the year to develop and pilot initiatives, with a view to the finalised future policy direction and associated programmes/support going live in 2022. Within this context, Northern Ireland's future agricultural policy is still very much a work in progress.

As things stand, the Northern Ireland Future Agricultural Policy Framework remains unpublished, but the intention to bring it forward in 2021 was announced by DAERA Minister Edwin Poots MLA in the Assembly on 17 November 2020⁴³. In his speech to the Assembly, Minister Poots outlined his broad priorities and summarised below are those parts that relate to environmental/habitat protection or enhancement:

- Four broad priorities for the NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework – one of these is a farming industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on, and guardianship of, air and water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity;
- NI Future Agricultural Policy Framework will be aligned with the principles set out in the Executive's Green Growth Strategy and will help to deliver its objectives;
- The framework will recognise the environmental assets on local farms and work on the basis that farmers should be properly rewarded for delivering environmental outcomes and achieve a return on the environmental assets present on their farms;
- An agri-environment programme will be a key component of the new Agricultural Policy Framework – the focus will be on creating a regime that properly incentivises and rewards the protection of existing, and the creation of new, environmental assets;
- Whilst work on the development of bespoke environmental measures takes place, Northern Ireland's robust set of environmental laws will continue to provide protection against biodiversity loss - landscape features such as hedges and sheughs will continue to be protected under Cross Compliance;
- Commitment to consult with the full range of agricultural and environmental stakeholders in developing the future agricultural framework and the approach to future agriculture support payments.

⁴³ [Northern Ireland Assembly, Official Report \(Hansard\), Tuesday 17 November 2020 Volume 133, No 2, page 34](#)

There are no further details around the specific measures or supports as they relate to the environment/habitat that will be incorporated into the Northern Ireland Agricultural Policy Framework.

Turning to other neighbouring jurisdictions, table 3 below provides a brief overview of the environmental/habitat protection/enhancement measures that are being developed across the rest of the UK and Ireland as part of agricultural policy.

Table 3 : Overview of proposed environmental/habitat protection or enhancement measures across GB and Ireland

Country	Provisions
England	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Path to Sustainable Farming - Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024⁴⁴ - published in November 2020; • farming and the countryside contributing significantly to environmental goals including addressing climate change – a key priority; • Under broad heading of Environmental and animal welfare, outcomes as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ New Countryside Stewardship agreements and capital grants; ➢ Environmental Land Management National Pilots; ➢ Tree Health Pilot; ➢ Farming in Protected Landscapes. • More specifically the Environmental Land Management support has 3 components: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI); ➢ Local Nature Recovery; ➢ Landscape Recovery. • Environmental Land Management will also play a role in supporting the “30by30” target, to protect 30% of England’s land for biodiversity by 2030, through habitat creation and restoration, or securing long-term management and protection for wildlife-rich habitats.
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2019 the Scottish Government established a Farming and Food Production Future Policy Group⁴⁵ tasked with determining policy beyond 2024 and to publish their findings in 2020 – yet to be published – will shape future policy direction; • 6 broad priorities that Farming and Food Production Future Policy Group is looking at – one of these is sustainability; • No final report published as yet and no further detail on how sustainability will be delivered with regards to environment/habitat.
Wales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh Government released Agriculture (Wales) White Paper in December 2020⁴⁶; • Consultation on White Paper was open until 21 March 2021; • White Paper has a key focus of sustainable food production incorporating supporting changes to farming practice to respond to the climate emergency, the

⁴⁴ [The Path to Sustainable Farming: An Agricultural Transition Plan 2021 to 2024, DEFRA, November 2020](#)

⁴⁵ [Farming and Food Production Future Policy Group webpage, Scottish Government website, 15 April 2021](#)

⁴⁶ [Agriculture \(Wales\) White Paper, Consultation Document, Welsh Government, 16 December 2020](#)

	<p>decline of biodiversity and the public health issues associated with emissions from agriculture;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government committed to reversing the loss of farmland biodiversity through a proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme.
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As an EU Member State, Ireland remains under the Common Agricultural Policy. The next iteration of the CAP covering the 2021-27 period is still being negotiated – the European Commission published a draft CAP proposals document in 2018⁴⁷. • CAP post 2020 has nine key objectives including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Environmental care; ➤ Preserving landscapes and biodiversity; • New CAP will go operation in 2023 – January 2021 European Commission published a list of potential agricultural practices⁴⁸ that eco-schemes could support under the new CAP that included the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Agro-ecology; ➤ Agro-forestry; ➤ High Nature Value Farming.

⁴⁷ [Future of the common agricultural policy, European Commission webpage, 14 December 2020](#)

⁴⁸ [List of potential Agricultural Practices that Eco-Schemes could support, European Commission, January 2021](#)

Appendix 1 – Distribution of Natura 2000 (SPA+SAC) sites and agri-environment scheme participation by Assembly constituency

