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Ulster Wildlife

Ulster Farmers' Union

Barriers to Uptake of Peatland Restoration for Farmers and Landowners in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Peatlands are one of the most valuable ecosystems in Northern Ireland, providing ecosystem services such as regulating water quality, reducing flood severity, unique biodiversity and carbon storage. Peatlands also have cultural significance as living historic landscapes, and agricultural importance primarily for grazing of livestock.

Having farmers and landowners on board is imperative when we look at peatland restoration targets, however up until now, uptake of restoration has been low. With it now being stated that over 80% of peatlands in Northern Ireland are degraded,[1] careful consideration is needed in how best to encourage farmers to engage with peatland management, including addressing barriers. The aim of this report is to identify the barriers in the uptake of peatland restoration for farmers and landowners in Northern Ireland.

1 Evans, C., Artz, R., Moxley, J., Smyth, M-A., Taylor, E., Archer, N., Burden, A., Williamson, J., Donnelly, D., Thomson, A., Buys, G., Malcolm, H., Wilson, D., Renou-Wilson, F. & Potts, J. (2017) Implementation of an emission inventory for UK peatlands. Report to the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Bangor.

Context

Northern Ireland's Peatlands

Peatlands in NI cover approximately 12% of land area, including upland blanket bog and lowland raised bogs.[2] Historically, farmers have been encouraged through government policy and subsidies to drain peatland areas to allow them to increase stocking capacity and production, this change in land management along with other factors such as peat extraction, more adverse weather conditions and erosion has had a negative effect on the long term health of peatlands. Peatlands are significant for livestock production for those who farm these areas, with grazing also being an essential tool for positive management used to enhance biodiversity and scrub and wildfire control,[3] so enabling farmers to engage and participate is not just beneficial for rural communities but for future peatland health.

NI Peatland Strategy

Published in September, the Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy outlines the proposed direction of travel to meet the Climate Change Committee recommendations for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from peatland and meeting our statutory commitments within the Climate Change Act Northern Ireland 2022, with a target of 150,000 hectares to be restored by 2050.[4] With a delivery plan to follow outlining more detailed steps as to how this target will be met.

Peatland Management to date

Previous agri-environment schemes have not given much consideration to peatlands. With limited options and relatively low payments, there was significant lack of uptake for these options, leading to limited peatland restoration across Northern Ireland up until now. To date, there is approximately 1,750 ha being documented as restored. Addressing this low level of participation from farmers and landowners is crucial to meeting or getting close to ambitious restoration targets.

Local Landscape

Northern Ireland's landownership is characterised by a high number of small farms, 89% being small or very small,[5] meaning NI's peatland landscapes often span over numerous farm businesses. For example; within large areas of blanket bog, like the Sperrins, Mournes or Garron Plateau, there are multiple enterprises farming within these areas, each with different management priorities and techniques, some graze for beef, others sheep, with potential for different stocking, scrub management.

In addition to this, many peatland areas fall within commonage areas rather than exclusive ownership, used for shared grazing, meaning decision making over restoration work requires consensus amongst all rights holders. This complex and fragmented landownership impacts the scale and pace of which peatland restoration can be carried out. As well as grazing rights, turbary rights have also been culturally and economically significant in rural areas, rights that continue today, like commonage, turbary right-holders can be difficult to identify and further complicate delivery of peatland management.

2 Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA). (2025) Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040. Belfast: The Northern Ireland Executive.
3 McAdam, J. (2024) Changes in upland biodiversity resulting from agriculture in NI. A literature Review for the Office for Environmental Protection
4 Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA). (2025) Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040.
5 Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA). 2023. The Agricultural Census in Northern Ireland: Results for June 2023. Belfast: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

Methodology

Development of Survey

To help identify and understand the barriers to uptake of peatland restoration, a short 9 question survey was created for farmers and landowners (Appendices A). The questions explored the following: the extent of peatland on their farms, participation in management schemes, perceived challenges, motivators, access to support, and willingness to engage in restoration activities or front costs.

The survey was also used as a way to encourage discussion with farmers and landowner and gain verbal feedback at engagement events.

Landowner events and engagement

Landowner engagement events were held in partnership with Ulster Wildlife across Northern Ireland to increase awareness of peatland restoration. Presentations were given by Ulster Wildlife staff on the process and practicalities of peatland restoration, and its importance, followed by a presentation from UFU Peatlands Officer on policy and past and present agri-environment schemes. Surveys were handed out at the events, with questions and group discussion held after the presentations.

There were four events held across NI; Cloughmills (7 attended), Draperstown (25), Gortin (10), and Cushendun (5), the surveys were also handed out at site visits, one on one farm visits and to the UFU Hill Farming Committee in order to gauge opinions and survey responses. The survey results will be discussed within this paper along with other issues highlighted from one on one and group discussions.

Results

1. What percentage of your farm is peatland?

% of Farm That Is Peatland	Percentage
0–10%	**10.2%**
10–20%	**6.1%**
20–30%	**16.3%**
30–40%	**8.2%**
40–50%	**18.4%**
Over 50%	**32.7%**
Not sure	**8.2%**

2. How many acres of peatland do you manage?

Acres of Peatland	Percentage
0–10	**12.2%**
10–20	**0.0%**
20–30	**4.1%**
30–40	**6.1%**
40–50	**6.1%**
Over 50	**65.3%**
Not sure	**6.1%**

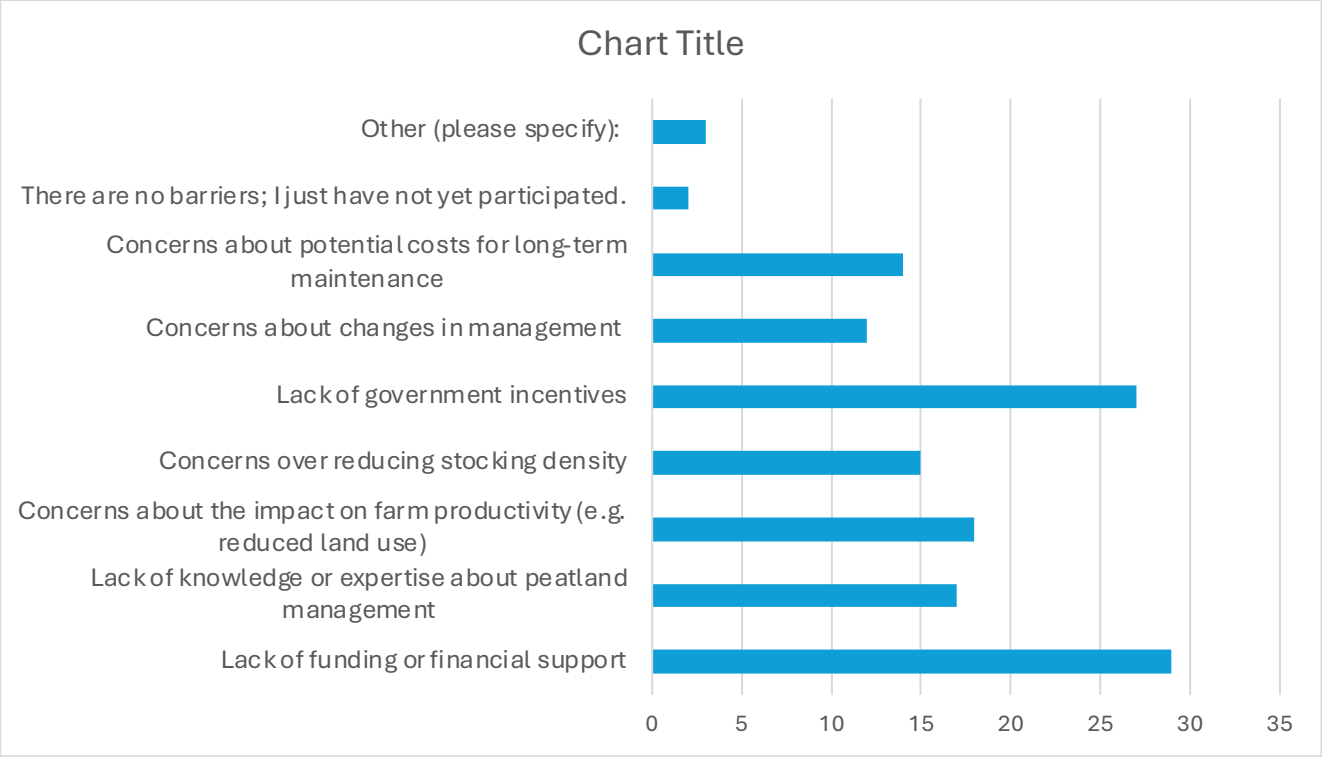
A significant proportion (32.7%) of respondents have **over half** their farm on peatland soil. With **over 60% of those surveyed managing over 50 acres of peatland.**

3. Are you currently of have you ever been in any schemes involving peatland management?

Scheme Involvement	Percentage
Yes, I am currently in a scheme	**34.7%**
No, however I have been previously	**18.4%**
No, I have never participated in a scheme	**46.9%**

In total, **65% of those surveyed were not currently participating in a scheme.**

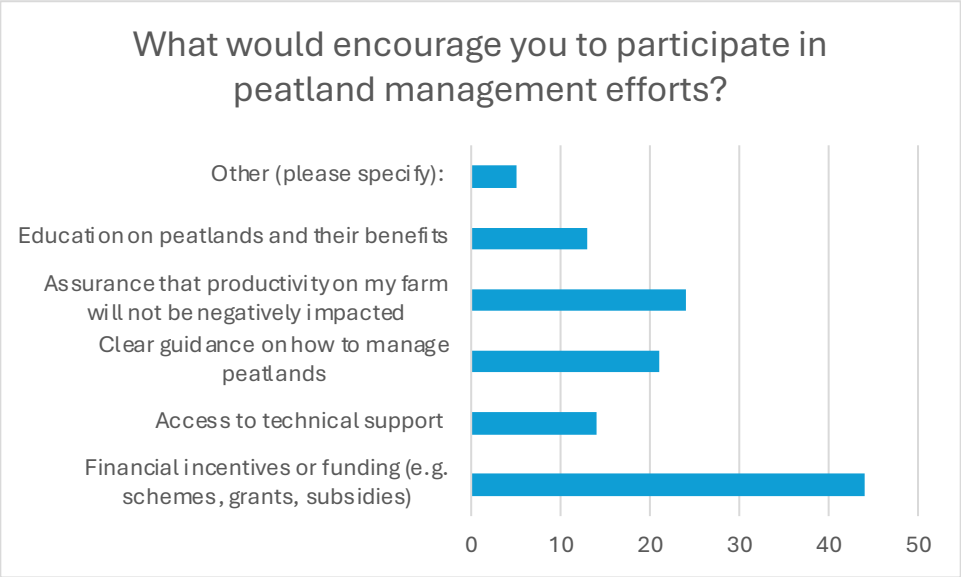
4. If you are not currently participating in peatland management, what are the main barriers?



Funding and government support were voted the biggest barriers to uptake, highlighting the financial concerns for many farmers. A number also pointed to knowledge gaps about peatland management, concerns about farm productivity and management changes followed closely by concerns about ongoing maintenance costs. With few saying they face no barriers to uptake.

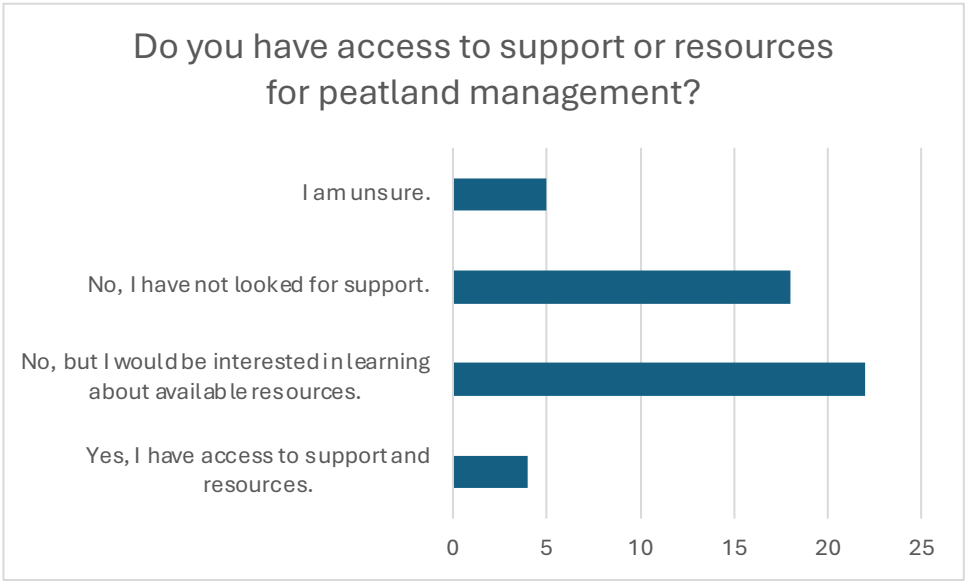
5. *What would encourage you to participate in peatland management efforts?*

Financial incentive through grants/schemes etc hold the vast majority of votes. Assurance over **farm productivity** is also important and clear **guidance** and **technical support** matter. 13 out of the ~ 60 also indicated **education** over management benefits are still needed.



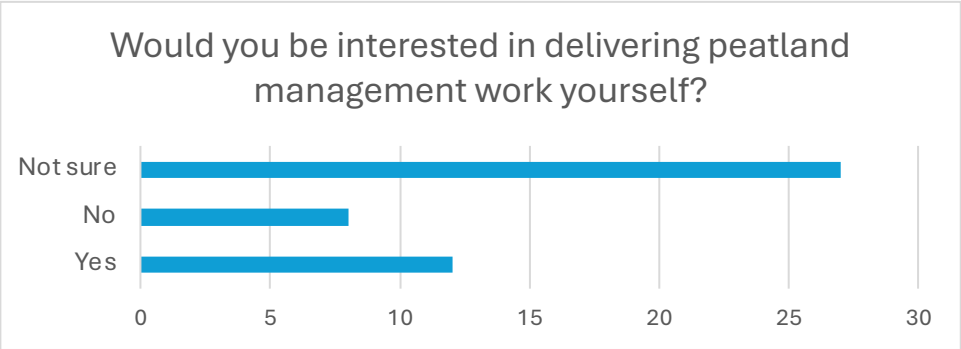
6. *Do you have access to support or resources for peatland management?*

80% participants claim to not have support or access to resources currently for peatland management, with over half of these showing interest in learning about available resources.



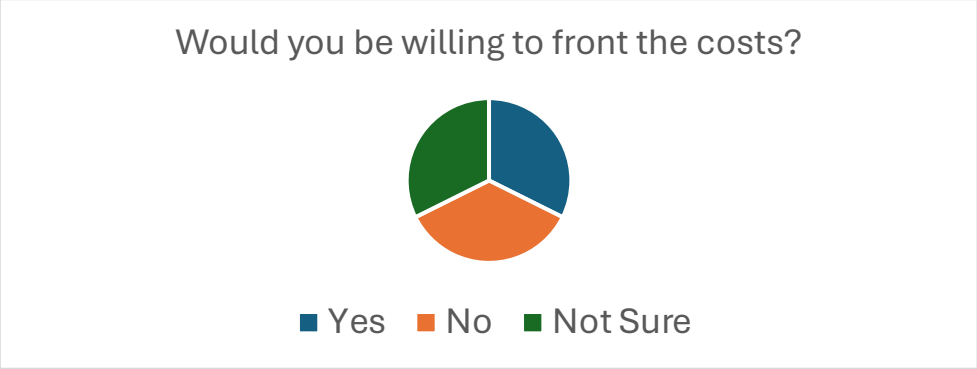
7. *Would you be interested in delivering peatland management work yourself?*

A majority were unsure of delivering peatland management on their farm, showing a lot of uncertainty from farmers around carrying out this work themselves.

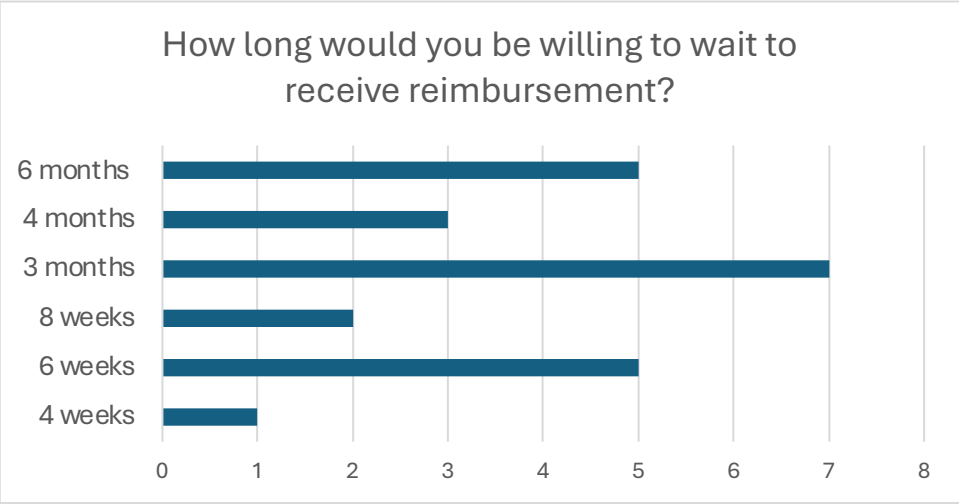


8. *Would you be willing to front the costs to be reimbursed later?*

When asked if they would be willing to front the costs of work themselves, there was almost an even split between "Yes", "No", and "Not sure". With only a third wanting to front the initial costs themselves.



9. *How long would you be willing to wait to receive reimbursement?*



The most common response when asked how long they would be willing to wait for reimbursement for carrying out interventions was 3 months, followed by 6 months and 6 weeks.

Opportunity for additional comments were given for questions 4 and 5, where some additional barriers were stated (See Appendix C). These will be addressed in "*Issues raised through discussion*" section.

Overview

The survey gathered responses from 60 participants to understand farmers' involvement in, and potential barriers to the uptake of peatland management in Northern Ireland. Key observations from the survey results will be outlined below, followed by the identified barriers.

Key Observations

- For the farmers surveyed; a large portion manage farms where peatland makes up more than half of their land, with most managing over 50 acres. Engagement in agri-environment is mixed, almost half having never taken part in peatland management schemes, this low uptake in schemes is significant considering the large acreage covered by farmers surveyed, further highlighting the scope for expanding participation amongst farmers in the future.

- Financial concerns are the primary factor, a *lack of funding/government incentives* were the biggest barriers, combining this with the results that financial support and reassurance about farm productivity are the were the strongest motivators, this highlights the financial considerations and policy incentives that strongly influence participation. (The long term maintenance costs also ranked highly as a barrier.)

- A significant number pointed to *lack of knowledge or expertise* about peatland management being a barrier, highlighting knowledge gaps, with the vast majority claiming not to have access to support or resources on peatland management.

- Respondents also expressed, in relatively equal parts, worries about *impact on farm productivity*, *reducing stocking density* and *changes in management,* reflecting practical implications for their farm being an issue.

- Willingness to engage exists, but uncertainty is high. Many respondents are unsure about delivering peatland works themselves, although relatively few (8) voted "No". There was also uncertainty around fronting costs, indicating a need for clearer guidance on cost of restoration and management.

- Reimbursement expectations are moderate: When considering how long they would be willing to wait on reimbursement there was a range of responses. Most are comfortable waiting up to around three months for repayment if they cover upfront restoration costs. However, delays longer than 3/6months may be less acceptable.

- From the results we see there are key financial and practical barriers to the uptake of peatland management. The main barriers being financial concerns, fears around productivity and uncertainty around carrying out these works.

Key Barriers

We can group the data gathered in the surveys into three "key" barriers, these key barriers were identified as:

i) Lack of financial incentives,
ii) Fears around productivity,
iii) Uncertainty over the long term outcomes of peatland restoration.

These key barriers identified through the survey data also appeared consistently across each of the farmer outreach events, and are often agreed upon during stakeholder discussions as the key obstacles stopping farmer and landowner engagement in peatland restoration. They will be outlined in further detail below.

i) Financial Incentives

From the survey, the results indicated two most chosen reasons for not currently taking part in peatland management were the *lack of government incentives and lack of funding/ financial support*, and when asked what would encourage uptake, *financial support* was the main motivator. This feedback highlights the critical role of economic incentives when taking action for peatland restoration. When engaging with farmers and landowners at outreach events, the consensus was that peatland management must make financial sense for the farm business for farmers to want to undertake it. Another barrier that scored highly in the survey was *concerns over potential costs of long term maintenance,* again showing concern over not just initial restoration costs, but the long term cost of managing restoration works.

Currently, benefits such as enhanced biodiversity, carbon sequestration and flood mitigation, while important, do not currently translate into financial returns for farms, potentially hindering farmers seeing peatland management as a long term plan for their land, especially in comparison with livestock production.

The concern over financial support indicates that low agri-environment scheme payment rates may have contributed to the lack of uptake. Although there were financial incentives within the previous agri-environment schemes, payment rates were not competitive.

Remedial Management options often didn't offer ample incentive, at only £40 per hectare for blanket bog, heath, and lowland raised bogs, dipping to £20 if over 50 hectares were entered. When you consider the reduction in livestock/need to rent other ground somewhere else to graze, to many, the payments available did not make for a viable option for their farm business. Uptake of plastic dam installation on lowland raised bog was also very low, with only 2 farms entering

ii) Fears Around Productivity

From the survey results, the second highest *concern was around productivity*, there was also considerable concern over potential reduction in stocking density. Farmers' have spent considerable time, effort and financial investment building up their herds, and flocks, so having to cut numbers may be a source of anxiety. Along with *reassurance that productivity on the farm won't be negatively impacted,* scoring highly as a motivator, showing that productivity and stocking rates are of high importance.

Having been incentivised in recent years to drain peatland areas and increase stock numbers in these areas, there may be unwillingness to reduce numbers and potentially hinder future productivity.

From the survey and discussions, its apparent farmers want assurances their farm business will remain viable, with many questioning if there will be long term financial compensation to compensate for any lost productivity.

In addition, control of stocking rates are seen as important not just from a financial perspective but as a way of managing and maintaining land. From discussions, there is also a concern with reduction in stock in that the reduction of grazing may mean the subsequent decrease in quality of the land, for example with scrub or conifer encroachment, highlighted by some farmers on land managed under SAAC and ASSIs prescriptions.

iii) Uncertainty of Long Term Outcomes

A clear outcome of both the survey and discussions had at outreach events is the feeling of uncertainty amongst farmers, with survey feedback indicating the vast majority are unsure about delivering peatland management work themselves.

This a uncertainty spans a range of factors, and during discussions, questions arose around the following; what will restoration look like long term? What will the initial cost be? Will there be maintained cost and what will this look like? What will incentives be in the long term if any? Will restoration deliver the promised benefits like carbon sequestration and improved biodiversity? What NI specific research is being done on carbon sequestration/ emissions and what does it say? Who's to say that government policy won't change again if social and economic demands shift?

The survey showed a demand for clarity on the long term nature of peatland restoration, with most siting they don't have ample access to resources but most saying they would be interested in learning more. There was also high interest in clear guidance on management, with a lack of knowledge being cited as another perceived barrier.

Within further discussions during outreach events, there was uncertainty over the long term nature of peatland restoration and Agri-Environment Schemes. For example, with AES offering agreements of 5 years, there was still uncertainty as to what happens after this, with no guarantee of payments continuing funding after the contract ends.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of peatland restoration, a lack of current scheme or information in regards to a future scheme generates uncertainty – upland areas not being treated as the priority they should be. The lack of clarity around funding and long term strategy in regards to AES does not reflect to farmers the importance of peatland management or garner trust that government wants to enable restoration work and long term management work for farmers. Without a cohesive, integrated policy, farmers may lack confidence and the drive to engage.

Trust and Policy Dissonance

Something that remained a palpable theme existing alongside the barriers and issues addressed in this report is a sense of disconnect between government and peatland farmers.

Outside of the survey, through discussion with farmers and peatland practitioners, it should be noted that farmers feel increasingly disconnected and in some instances distrustful of government policies and strategies around peatland restoration. We see this through comments made within the surveys and through farmer discussions at outreach events and during one to one and stakeholder meetings.

For example, comments regarding designation; although portrayed by government to protect areas for biodiversity, farmers feel designations are too restrictive, can be overly punitive and do not help meet environmental needs. Designations, that often do not reflect mosaiced ecosystems, come with prescriptions that are perceived by some farmers as "having an adverse impact on the land" both for agricultural production and wildfire risk. Other factors such as penalties and the overuse of "degraded" label for upland areas, only add to this perception. Farmers raise concerns during meetings about a 'one-size fits all' approach to designated land, and it is their opinion that the prescriptive rules set by government fail to recognise the generational expertise and local knowledge of the farming and rural community.

Also, classifications of "*Unfavourable*" and "*Favourable*" is not only an over simplification of these mosaiced areas but may be seen as punitive to farmers, as some sites could have many positive attributes and features, but need only one or two negative scores for the whole site to be marked unfavourable.

This policy and practice misalignment, is continually reflected and evidenced throughout this report within barriers and issues highlighted, reinforcing the disconnect and subsequent disengagement of farmers in regards to peatland restoration and management. In order to find appropriate solutions for dissolving barriers to uptake, this needs to be recognised and understood to avoid repeating the same oversights.

Other Issues raised through Discussions

In addition to those addressed in the surveys, there were other issues raised through discussions with farmers that may deter engagement in peatland restoration. These included: issues around past schemes (Agri Environment Scheme Considerations) economic considerations, and social and cultural barriers.

Agri Environment Scheme Considerations

Fear of Penalties

Farmers fear being penalised and can easily be deterred from entering into schemes if there is a threat of harsh penalties, often for minor or unintentional breaches. With tight margins and limited resources it may even outweigh the perceived benefits of taking part in the restoration/management, especially when payments are already low, and even more so for small/medium farms.

Penalties can do more harm than good in the long run – negative stories spread and potentially discourage other farms in the area from engaging.

Limited options

More focused towards lowland raised bogs; plastic dams were the only option for damming in the previous EFS scheme. Included in site specific Remedial Management Plans (ssRMPs), payment rates for installation didn't take into consideration the cost of transporting dams to site, especially across difficult terrain. Some farmers raised concerns about introducing plastic into the environment unnecessarily. Trials are now being done across the UK and Ireland for the use of wool for damming and to reduce bare peat. As mentioned previously, limitations also arose around options for grazing and scrub management (Appendix D).

Slow Verification and Payment

In some cases landowners had not received inspections until a year or more after application. With slow verification and payment, may decrease willingness to front the costs of restoration due to reduced cashflow.

Many landowners would consider fronting the cost of restoration work, however reimbursement should be within around 3 months from fronting costs of work (See survey results).

Short application windows

Window for application into schemes have been very short, just two weeks in some cases, perceived by some to be punitive rather than incentivising.

Lack of guidance.

Unless already part of an Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) support group, farmers and landowners may find it difficult to navigate planning and administrative aspects of schemes. Support available to all farmers is needed to help advise in regards to applications and planning.

Slow response times on consent applications from NIEA.

For example flailing for fire breaks/biodiversity.

Eligibility of Commonage

Commonage is technically eligible for the most recent agri-environment schemes but in practice it proves very difficult to implement. Areas of commonage can't be entered through

the DAERA mapping systems. Commonage can have an multiple and sometimes unknown landowners sharing one area, all parties need to be in agreement for work to be carried out. Although it can be done; we see this with Lough Beg;180 hectares of commonage was included in EFS as a breeding wader site. It as a complex process, including paper maps and a designated DAERA officer was allocated to build trust and rapport. Progress on this front could look like a bespoke mapping process, especially for commonage.

Economic Considerations

Looking outside of agri-environment schemes, there are other economic considerations that may play a role in deciding to enter into peatland management especially when there are businesses and livelihoods at stake.

Farmers must take the whole farm business into account when considering peatland management. Carbon budgets may be an option for farm businesses in the future, although progress with this is slow, with a lot of uncertainty. Some see the potentially in using peatland areas to offset their emissions but with no confirmation of this, it does little to increase confidence or willingness to prioritise peatland restoration.

Outside of peatland management there are other economic factors affecting farmers working in upland or "less favourable" areas in Northern Ireland:

- **Reduction in Basic Payment for Sheep farmers –** Sheep farmers have seen a 17% reduction in their basic payment and are unable to benefit from sustainability payments such as Suckler Cow Scheme and Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme, this reduction in funding is a concern for many.
- **Decreased viability of upland farming (**Appendix E**)** Hill farms are the lowest earning amongst farm businesses and therefore may be less likely to partake in something they feel could pose a risk their livelihoods.
- **Concerns over Inheritance tax** – a concern for many as the loss of relief on inheritance for some farms may prove to be an additional stress on business viability.

Although these are not exclusive to peatland management, they still affect a farmers' likelihood to take part in restoration/management.

Education and Awareness

Feedback from the survey shows a number said they attributed a *lack of knowledge or expertise about peatland management* as being a barrier to uptake, suggesting that educational or advisory support could help increase involvement.

There are issues of awareness and education over peatland topics such as management and ecosystem services. Some landowners are unsure of the technical aspects of restoration, such as what interventions are necessary/available to them or what indicator species they have present. Many farmers also have concerns over what effect hydrological management can have over neighbouring farms. (Appendix C).

Through discussions at outreach events, there is also a noted misconception around "flooding" or "rewetting", some farmers believe that peatland restoration means completely abandoning farming on the land, leading to resistance.

Social and Cultural barriers

Generational Renewal - Upland farms are generally low profit, marginal enterprises, therefore land abandonment is a real threat as rural communities in these areas struggle due to migration of young people out of rural areas. Succession is a concern for many who want to leave their farm as a viable business for the next generation, so may therefore feel conflicted when it comes to engaging in long term interventions on peatland areas.

Traditional practices - Farming practices in Northern Ireland are deeply rooted in tradition, with many farmers following trusted land management practices passed down through generations. This deep-seated attachment to traditional methods can foster resistance to new approaches, especially when they are seen as unfamiliar or untested.

Production mindset – Farmers have been encouraged and incentivised through policies in the past to drain peatland areas to increase production, and so may seem counter intuitive now to reverse this. In the same way that they've put time, money and energy into building up their stocks and genetics of cattle and sheep, it feels wrong to go back on this as they have been geared to meet consumer demand and produce high quality products from these areas.

Language used – "Rewetting" and even "restoration" and "reactivation" have negative connotations, implying that this is fixing wrong doing on the landowners part. Many stakeholders, have different definitions of what completed restoration looks like, depending on objective. Often stakeholders cannot agree one specific definition of restoration, this can be confusing for land owners.

Difference of Opinion on "Restoration" There are differing opinions of what Peatland interventions or peatland management should look like or what "restored" peatland should look like. For example, many farmers believe management should not include large areas of deep water. Some still see peat or plastic dams as artificial and therefore land is not "restored" to natural form.

Heightened fear of livestock worrying - This could be due to potential increased footfall from tourism, or that interventions could cause more hazards and areas of concern for sheep to become stuck or drowning.

Points of discussion

It needs to be stated that often those attending outreach meetings or engaging with restoration practitioners are those with the capacity to consider restoration – sometimes not necessarily production driven, potentially those at retirement age, particularly environmentally minded or those with are sometimes in a better position to consider water table management, and so survey results may not be wholly representative of those currently farming peatlands or less favourable areas.

Conclusion

Farmer and landowner engagement has shown significant barriers to uptake of peatland restoration. The survey highlighted key barriers; a lack of financial incentive, fear around reductions in productivity and long term uncertainty around peatland management and farm business. The recommendations that follow are tailored to address these barriers as well as other issues revealed through farmer and landowner feedback and engagement. Farmers and landowners are a key stakeholder in delivering the societal and environmental benefits through peatland management, these recommendations aim to increase uptake in future peatland management.

Recommendations

Dedicated Peatland Fund for Farmers

Through the survey and feedback it is evident that secure and long term funding for farmers is key to increasing participation. To encourage participation in peatland management, a new **dedicated peatland fund for farmers** is recommended. A long term dedicated fund would help alleviate concerns over the long term nature of peatland management and potential impacts to farm business. It is crucial that the funding is **long term,** well exceeding previous schemes and funding cycles of 4/5 years.

The commitment and assurance of a designated fund would help reduce uncertainty amongst farmers, as well as reducing the financial risk associated with peatland restoration.

A **Results based scheme** would strongly be recommended, not just by farming representatives but by environmental organisations and restoration practitioners as a more effective approach which encourages the correct culture and outcomes. A Results based scheme encourages a tailored approach for each farm that recognises mosaiced landscapes, while avoiding an overly prescriptive approach. It also encourages the use of local knowledge and expertise to tailor management of the land, Inspiring a sense of pride and agency as It rewards stewardship, while acknowledging early adopters/those who have already been practising positive peatland management. It also allows for a better relationships between landowners and practitioners in partnership towards a similar goal. A hybrid scheme could be considered, allowing the stability of a results based scheme with the high impact of an action payment.

As an example; the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES) in the Republic of Ireland, uses a results based scorecard to access farmers on *indicator species* (ecology) *water table management* (hydrology) and *threats/features* (drainage, supplementary feeding etc). A scorecard may also reduce the need for penalties -another barrier, as "negative" features are already included in the scoring system.

A future scheme should also be **reflective** of the ecosystem services being delivered. We know positive peatland management is worthwhile for wider society through its importance for flood mitigation and water quality. It was stated through the Co-operation Across Borders for Biodiversity (CABB) water quality project that "for every £1 spent on Garron, natural capital benefits worth £3.91 would be realised."[6] Showing that this work is a valuable and worthwhile investment, investment that should come from outside of the agricultural budget.

A long term and stable funding plan takes into consideration the nature of peatland management and could provide reassurance to farmers. A recent survey carried out to gauge upland farmers preferences on future schemes highlighted a preference into an agri-environment scheme length of 10 years, as opposed to 20 or 30 years.[7] Tranches may not need to be much longer than 5 years, however there needs to be a long term guarantee from government that funding will still be available after tranche ends and that farmers can re-enter.

6 Northern Ireland Water article (2025) (See references for link)

7 Anglioloni, S. (2024) Farmers' Preferences for Results-Based Peatland Regeneration Scheme Design: Outcome and Impact https://www.afbini.gov.uk/files/afbini/publications/Simone%20Angioloni%20Farmers%E2%80%99%20Preferences%20for%20Results-Based%20Peatland%20Regeneration%20Scheme%20Design%20Outcome%20and%20Impact_0.pdf

Education and Support From Locally Based officers

To help implement a successful results based scheme, education and support are imperative. Just 11% of those surveyed said they had access to support or resources around peatland restoration. EFS Groups were a vital part of scheme implementation in the past, offering tailored advice and practical and administrative help. Continuing these in some capacity, along with trained local officers would aid in effective implementation of peatland management schemes, and likely increase participation and engagement.

Just under half of those who completed the surveys said their own lack of knowledge around peatland management held them back from partaking. Education around what restoration looks like is important and should come in a variety of formats; online training is of course useful and should be readily available, but it is widely reported by farmers and restoration practitioners that nothing compares to walking the sites to see real life examples.

Training

Some farmers expressed interest in carrying out their own interventions. Training and workshops should be available for those who want to carry out restoration work themselves, for example installation of wool or peat dams. This could also mean help to understand and carry out hydrological and condition assessments of the site, followed by help with the planning process to ensure the right result is achieved. Training should be available both in person and online,[8] and preferably delivered by a local, trusted officer to stimulate farmer engagement and participation.[9]

Wool use in restoration

Coir logs are commonly used in peatland restoration, but often imported from as far as Southeast Asia, with questionable regulations and high carbon footprint, coir is arguably unsustainable in long term. Using wool in its place, is not only sustainable but creates a more circular economy for our uplands, with trials now being carried out across the UK.[10] [11] [12] The value of wool in recent years has plummeted, with many farmers receiving less for a fleece that it costs to shear it. Utilisation of wool in peatland interventions acknowledges it as a valuable resource instead of a wasted by-product while helping to mitigate land abandonment in these rural communities. Already being trialled successfully in Co. Durham in the North Pennines and by the South West Peatland Partnership in Dartmoor, the use of wool may raise interest and awareness around peatland management while building rapport between practitioners and farmers.

If wool trials continue to show success, it is recommended that its use be implemented in further restoration plans, and reconsider the "waste product" classification, allowing more efficient utilisation of this valuable natural resource across peatland restoration.[13]

8 Angioloni, S., Cerroni, S., Jack, C. and Ashfield, A., (2024) Eliciting farmers' preferences towards agriculture education in Northern Ireland. The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension, 30(4), pp.591-615.

9 Quinn, B., Henderson, S., Hollywood, L.E., Anglioloni, S., and Caskie, P., (2025) Factors affecting farmer participation in agri-environment schemes in the uplands of Northern Ireland. The Journal of Rural Studies, 103598, vol. 116.

10 Mainprize, C. (2025) Woolly Thinking? Our Peatland Wool Trial. Cumbrian Climate Change Consortium. Available at: https://www.carboncentre.org/post/the-wool-trial

11 Taylor, E., Robertson, L. and Bloor, M. (2025) Sheep's Wool in Peatland Restoration: Lab Analysis and Research. Project Report. Dumfries: Crichton Carbon Centre. Available at: https://www.carboncentre.org/post/the-wool-trial

12 South West Peatland Partnership (2024), Trialling Dartmoor wool in peatland restoration. Available at:https://southwestpeatlandpartnership.co.uk/news/trialling-dartmoor-wool-in-peatland-restoration

13 Copa-Cogeca (2026) Wool circularity – removing legal barriers to exploit its full potential. Brussels: Copa-Cogeca, Livestock, Fish and Crops Productions, 26 February 2026.

Change in Terminology

Terminology such as "rewetting and "restoration" may have negative connotations amongst farmers. Although it may seem trivial, language matters greatly. From this comes the recommendation to replace the use of these terms with terms like "water table management", "hydrological management" or "peatland management" not only are these terms more attractive to landowners they are more in align with the practicalities and reflect the ongoing and continuous nature of the work.

The same applies for classifications such as "*Favourable*" and *Unfavourable*", although these terms were originally intended as internal classifications, these generalised and oversimplified terms became more widely used in reports and press, resulting in miscommunication and leaving some farmers feeling disparaged.

Summary Table of Actions		
Highest impact		
Recommendation	**Barrier Addressed**	**Reasoning**
Establishment of a dedicated peatland fund, separate from the agricultural budget (reflecting societal benefits).	• Farmers are deterred by short, unpredictable funding cycles, previous payment rates made peatland restoration unviable. • Helps mitigate some uncertainty about long-term land use viability.	• Feedback from farmers was received over longevity of schemes and funding that didn't reflect societal benefits and long term management work needed. • Long-term maintenance costs were a significant concern.
Results-based Scheme. Including hybrid action to help cover costs of initial works.	• Fears over productivity and stocking rates – farmers can tailor management plans to their site. • Allows farmers to manage scrub encroachment	• Rewards existing good practice. • Scorecard model replaces punitive penalties that deters some farmers. • Could reduce long term risk for some farmers.
Supporting Actions		
Recommendation	**Barrier Addressed**	**Reasoning**
Support from locally based officers. eg. EFS group officers	• *"Lack of knowledge or expertise about peatland management"*	• 89% were unsure or claimed they didn't have support when it came to peatland management.
Terminology Change For Example; "restoration" and "unfavourable"	• Disagreements on what "restoration" is. • Oversimplification of mosaiced landscapes.	• "Restoration" is vague, with many different interpretations. • "Unfavourable" not representative of mosaics, seen as punitive.
Replacing Coir with Wool	• Disconnect between peatland practitioners and landowners. • Over-use of foreign and potentially unsustainable and ethically questionable materials.	• Helps engage local farmers and build interest in the process through creation of circular economy.
Future Considerations		
Commonage Mapping	• Some farmers unable to enter into positive peatland management.	• Although eligible, lack of mapping and known stakeholders hinders restoration in these areas.

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey

Farmer Feedback

1. What percentage of your farm is peatland?

☐ 0-10% ☐ 20-30% ☐ 40-50% ☐ Not sure
☐ 10-20% ☐ 30-40% ☐ Over 50%

2. How many acres of peatland do you manage?

☐ 0-10 acres ☐ 20-30 acres ☐ 40-50 acres ☐ Not Sure
☐10-20 acres ☐ 30-40-acres ☐ 50 +
*Optional: _____ acres

3. Are you currently or have you ever been in any schemes involving peatland management?

☐ Yes, I am currently in a scheme
☐ No, however I have been in a scheme previously
☐ No, I have never participated in a scheme.

4. If you are not currently participating in Peatland management works, what are the main barriers for you? (Select all that apply.)

☐ a) Lack of funding or financial support
☐ b) Lack of knowledge or expertise about peatland management
☐ c) Concerns about the impact on farm productivity (e.g., reduced land use)
☐ d) Concerns over reducing stocking density
☐ e) Lack of government incentives or support
☐ f) Concerns about changes in management
☐ g) Concerns about potential costs for long-term maintenance
☐ h) There are no barriers; I just have not yet participated.
☐ i) Other (please specify):

_____

_____

(Please turn over)

5. What would encourage you to participate in peatland management efforts?

☐ a) Financial incentives or funding (e.g. schemes, grants, subsidies)
☐ b) Access to technical support
☐ c) Clear guidance on how to manage peatlands
☐ d) Assurance that productivity on my farm will not be negatively impacted
☐ e) Education on peatlands and their benefits
☐ f) Other (please specify):

_____

6. Do you have access to support or resources for peatland management (e.g., from local or national organizations)?

☐ Yes, I have access to support and resources.
☐ No, but I would be interested in learning about available resources.
☐ No, I have not looked for support.
☐ I am unsure.

7. Would you be interested in delivering any peatland management work yourself?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

8. Would you be willing to front the costs of restoration work, to be reimbursed later?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

9. If you were to front the costs for initial peatland works, how long would you be willing to wait to receive reimbursement?

☐ 4 weeks
☐ 6 weeks
☐ 8 weeks
☐ 3 months
☐ 4 months
☐ 6 months

Name:_____

Email:_____

Telephone:_____

Appendix B: Survey Quotes

Question. 4 – *If you are not participating in peatland management works, what are the main barriers? Other.*

-"Impacts on neighbouring ground, if blocking drains etc. partnership working in collaboration is needed."

-"Ensuring any actions are within cross compliance rules and schedules for protected sites."

-"Possibility to have access to machinery for farmers to carry out the work themselves?"

-"lack of cohesive, integrated peatland strategy, and engagement of peatland expertise"

-"lack of cognisance, lack of communication between (DAERA) departments"

Question 5 – *What would encourage you to participate in peatland management efforts?*

-"Flexible schemes that are tailored to individual site."

-"Bringing back native wildlife – Lapwing"

-*"Agree with NIEA on what peatland should look like"*

Appendix C: Quotes from Outreach events and discussions

Some quotes from Outreach events.

Cloughmills;

"...there needs to be a scheme in place that makes financial sense to farmers."

"We should recognise farmers are already doing "good things"

"Farmers need to be involved in creating these management plans, they know their land better than anyone"

Draperstown;

"...there's no incentive for farmers to restore peatland."

"...negativity around restoration leads to unwillingness to get involved"

"Farmers see it as flooding their land, or their neighbours land."

"Lack of cohesive message – peatlands are valuable but they're not"

"Hills are severely undergrazed... they are in a worse state now"

"You worry about entering these schemes... are you going to get penalised"

"what is restoration, what does it look like? How will it affect my neighbours farm?"

"Farmers know how to manage their land, they're able to deliver the necessary management for biodiversity, they have been stewards of the land for generations."

"...need to be thinking about those coming after me."

Gortin;

"farmers know biodiversity is important, but they need help to do more"

"... they should share a copy of (Rapid Condition) assessment with the farmer/landowner"

"...Forestry pose an issue... conifers are encroaching on peatlands"

"Who's to say this restoration will work, and you won't be asking to take it (dams) all out again in the future"

"if it (initial restoration) was a bigger investment would it be better to have the money paid upfront or if the farmer does have to pay costs up front should interest be added assuming that the famer had to take out a short term loan to cover the costs. If the money does have to be reimbursed after the work is done this should be done as soon as possible."

"Farmers are disenfranchised"

"DAERA need to show willingness to work with farmers... their skills and knowledge are being ignored."

Cushendun;

"...If and when the restoration is complete I think the farmer should be compensated for his participation"

"what will the cost be to farmers for restoration work, will they keep having to pay for upkeep of the work?"

"What if policy changes down the line again, peatlands restoration is a big risk for farmers."

One-to-one discussions;

"There has been a lack of co-design previously"

"I think there's a lack of research for uplands in regards to carbon... more needs to be done"

"Why not use wool (in place of coir logs), its local, and would get farmers interested in peatland restoration"

"Its not clear what this means for my farm in the future, peatland restoration is a risk... schemes are too short term, peatland management is long term"

"I never received a copy of the report done on our hill (condition assessment) how are you supposed to know how to make improvements?"

"The restrictions on designates sites do little for farming or biodiversity, they need to be looked at, and emended... it's not one size fits all."

"...we reached a point where people that are not associated have worked/managed these habitats is dictating how they should be managed."

"If bogs are to be treated as a public good because of their ability to store carbon then if that means farmers cannot use them to produce food by grazing sheep they must be compensated for giving up part of their livelihood"

"terminology like "unfavourable" can be misleading, always saying how bad farmers are, but they (farmers) have taken decisions to meet market demand and government policy, and should be incentivised for delivering for society and government!

"DAERA has to recognise that the primary focus on most of these farms is productive agricultural. To get buy in, any scheme must work along side this focus rather than restrict it."

"If possible assigning a designated adviser per area would give consistency to the farmers, the adviser would understand what works has been carried out and could advise accordingly."

"If the scheme is results based, outcomes would need to be assessed over a longer period of time. Not annually. Penalties should only be used for farmers operating in bad faith within the scheme, and not farmers who have not got the desired results but have done everything asked of them."

Appendix D: Payment rates in EFS

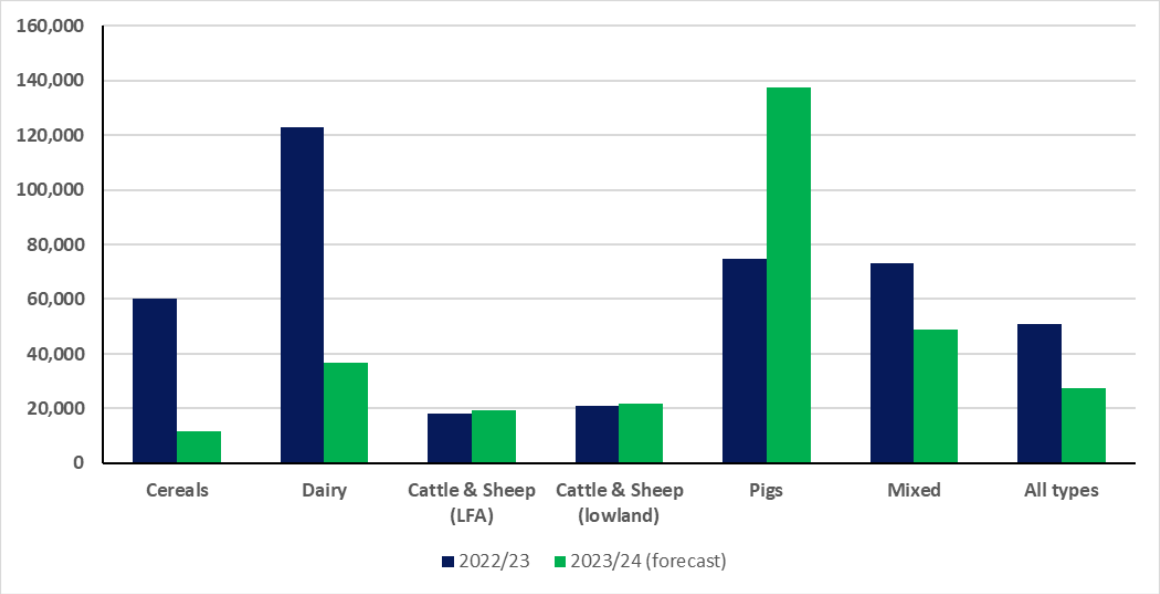
CODE	NPI RMOs	PAYMENT
DBS	Ditch Blocking – plastic piling dams (small dam)	£62/Dam
DBM	Ditch Blocking – plastic piling dams (medium dam)	£151/Dam
DBL	Ditch Blocking – plastic piling dams (large dam)	£385.16/Dam
HRF	Heather regeneration - Flailing	£58.68/ha
HRB	Heather regeneration – Controlled Burning	£142.30/ha
RLP/RLF	Rhododendron and laurel – Primary/Follow-up control	£5049.57/£90/ha
ARI	Rhododendron and laurel control – control by stem injection	Actual Costs
BPT/BFU	Treatment of Bracken – Primary/Follow-Up (Mechanised or Chemical)	£216.35/£108.30/ha

Plastic dam installation, ranging from £62.00 for a small dam, £151 for medium, and £385.16 for a large dam, didn't take into consideration time, kit needed to install the dams, diesel to get to site (many installation sites are in remote or how to reach areas), or if there's a need for a contractor. These payment rates were set in 2017 and not changed since, and therefore also do not equate for inflation.

Year 1 - 5:	£40.00/ha (0.10 – 50ha), £20.00/ha (50.01 – 100ha), £10.00/ha (>100ha)

EFS Higher remedial management payments for blanket bogs.

Appendix E: Average Farm Business Income by type of farm (£ per farm) 2022/23



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