

What is High Nature Value (HNV) Farmland?

Farming in Ireland in recent decades has not escaped the trend towards intensification. But despite this, a large proportion of Irish farmland is still managed in a way that works with nature and the landscape. This type of farmland is referred to as High Nature Value (HNV) farmland.

What the HNV concept recognises is that the nature interest of these HNV areas is intimately linked with farming practices and survives because of farming not despite it. So in HNV areas the preservation of biological diversity and nature value is linked with safeguarding the continuation of farming and long-established farming practices.

These farms have their roots in management systems that used regional breeds of livestock and drew upon local skills that complemented the climate and geography of the area. Few artificial fertilisers and chemicals were used and in many places small-scale cultivation was a part of the livestock production system. Exploiting and sustaining natural pastures and meadows often involved sophisticated but labour-intensive management practices.

The small size of most farms and the strong cultural traditions of the farmers add to the diversity of habitats at the landscape scale. Farming largely created and still maintains wet heaths and moors, a range of grasslands from mountain grazings to saltmarshes and machair, as well as a variety of marsh, wetland and river-side vegetation used as pasture, all of which are of very high nature conservation value



The key to High Nature Value farmland is that a high proportion of the farmland is semi-natural vegetation that in turn is the habitat for insects, plants, birds and mammals.

Where is HNV farmland found in Ireland?

As yet there has been no research work carried out in Ireland on where HNV farmland is found but a desk study carried out in 2003 for the European Environment Agency (EEA) recognised two types of HNV farmland that occur widely in Ireland:

Type 1: Farmland having a high proportion of semi-natural vegetation.

Type 2: Farmland having a mosaic of habitats and/or low-intensity land uses.

Using Europe-wide land cover data, predictive maps of HNV farmland were produced. For Ireland (see map) they include much of the marginal agricultural areas of the western counties as well as the uplands of the east. This is a reflection, in nature conservation terms, of features such as the upland and coastal heaths of Donegal, the blanket bogs of Mayo, the limestone grasslands of Sligo and Clare and the rocky landscapes of the Aran Islands, and so on.

Also included are areas of farmland where there are still intimate mosaics of semi-natural habitats together with improved grasslands and cultivated fields, rush pastures and small scale landscape features such as dry stone walls, hedges, ditches, earth banks, rocky outcrops, marshy areas, ponds and small woodlands. This is in many ways the “typical” or “traditional” Irish agricultural landscape. But while the hedges and walls remain in most areas, intensification has destroyed the semi-natural habitats on all but the poorest land. As a result this type of HNV farmland is commonest in the wet western lowlands from Leitrim in the north to Cork in the south.



High Nature Value areas are a result of varied farm management practices, but are always associated with low average farm livestock density. Current nature conservation designations, such as SACs and SPAs, will fall far short of maintaining the broad spectrum of HNV areas found in Ireland.

Areas of low stocking densities based on livestock units per hectare of grassland.



The small size of most farms adds to the diversity of habitats at the landscape scale.

Eric Bignal.

Farming on the edge - The way forward

The radical changes to agricultural support introduced by the latest CAP reform must serve as a catalyst for action to address the accelerating changes in the Irish countryside. Like other similar areas of the EU these changes cannot be addressed adequately with current agri-environment and rural development policies.

Ways need to be found to make farming viable without losing the management systems and practices that are now recognised as being so important for wildlife, the landscape and Ireland's natural heritage.

If they occur, the changes predicted overleaf will not be good for nature, for the landscape nor indeed for the social-economic well being of rural areas.

Agricultural contractors and merchants supplying feed and fertilisers will have to scale down their operations. Livestock marts will close, vets will be fewer and more expensive, forestry will expand on former agricultural land and house prices in rural areas will increase as tourism takes over from farming.

Wildlife has already suffered as hay making, tillage, and small scale cattle keeping has reduced, as slurry replaced straw manure, as silage and slatted sheds have increased and as rushes and scrub have colonised former grassland pastures.

This trend is now likely to be accompanied by: -
1. Reversion of land “improved” in the 1960s and 70s to wet acid pastures dominated by rushes. If no longer used as pasture for cattle much of this might ultimately end up planted with conifers.

2. Abandonment in the hills (where there is no profit from hill lambs coupled with high labour prices and a lack of shepherds and dogs) leading to an increase in coarse vegetation and scrub resulting in the vegetation of SACs changing markedly. Any short-term biological benefits in the hills might well be jeopardised by more frequent and more intense wildfires.

But the prognosis need not be wholly negative. There is no doubt that farmers will “wait and see” before they rush into changes, and if market prices are good the rate of change will be slower.

So there is a breathing space for action of perhaps a couple of years; but there is certainly no time for complacency.

The first steps are straightforward - we must

identify the HNV areas and describe the optimal farming systems that will sustain them. There should be a new scheme specifically targeting HNV farming areas. When the proposed reform of the LFA scheme happens, it must have HNV farmland as a central element. New schemes must assess properly and fully the management costs of these marginal farms. These are quite big steps.

A new scheme to support HNV farmland should be introduced, targeted at those farmers that are currently ‘delivering the goods’ but whose farming operations are not profitable. This new scheme could be introduced on a trial basis on some of Ireland's offshore islands. Such a pilot scheme could be realistically costed, the biological benefits would be relatively easy to monitor and there is still the necessary knowledge and interest amongst farmers to make it work.

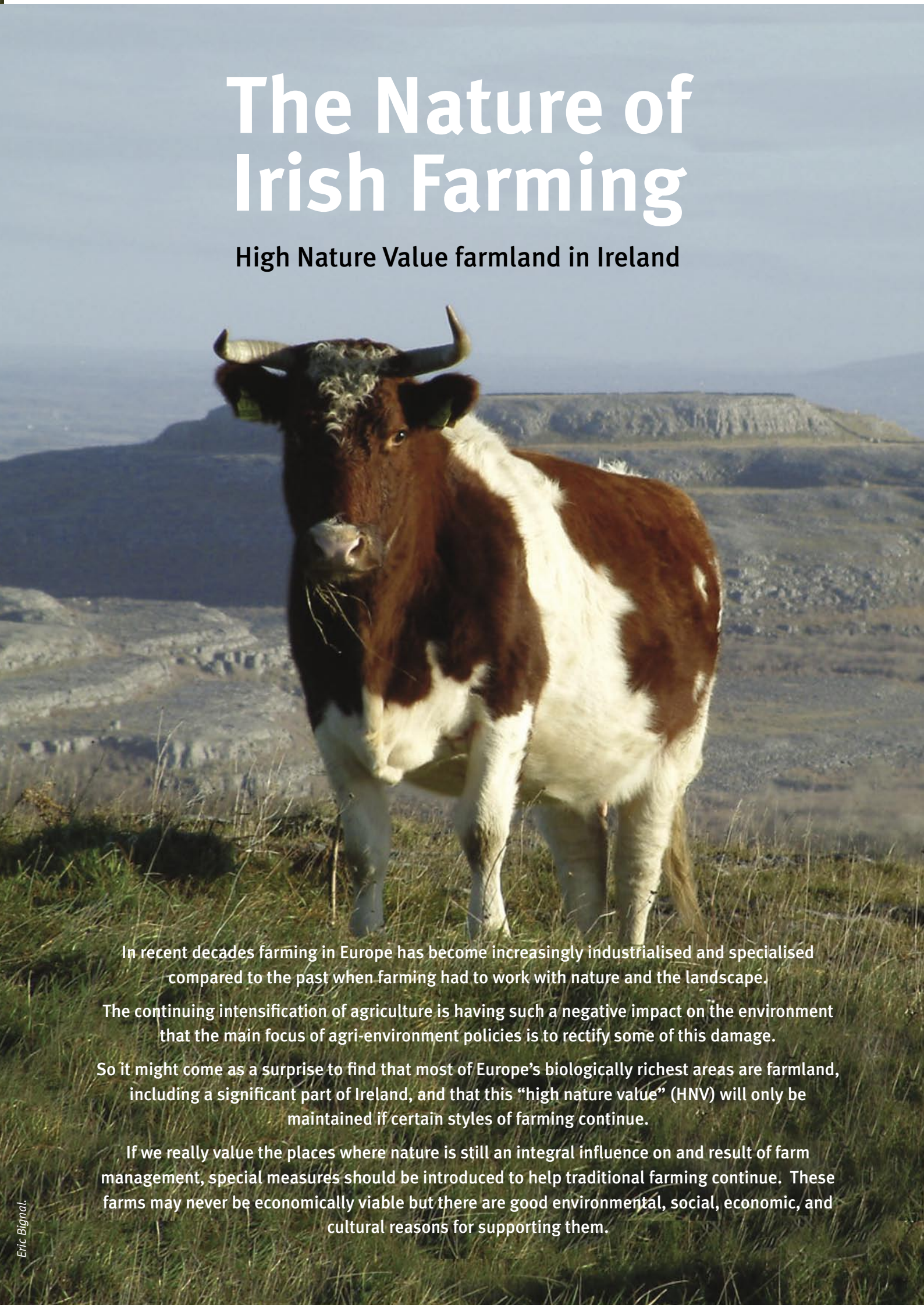


The introduction of a new HNV farmland scheme on a trial basis on some of the offshore islands, such as Tory Island, Co. Donegal, could bring great social and economic benefits for the islands.

Eric Bignal.

The Nature of Irish Farming

High Nature Value farmland in Ireland



In recent decades farming in Europe has become increasingly industrialised and specialised compared to the past when farming had to work with nature and the landscape.

The continuing intensification of agriculture is having such a negative impact on the environment that the main focus of agri-environment policies is to rectify some of this damage.

So it might come as a surprise to find that most of Europe's biologically richest areas are farmland, including a significant part of Ireland, and that this “high nature value” (HNV) will only be maintained if certain styles of farming continue.

If we really value the places where nature is still an integral influence on and result of farm management, special measures should be introduced to help traditional farming continue. These farms may never be economically viable but there are good environmental, social, economic, and cultural reasons for supporting them.

Eric Bignal.

THE NATURE OF IRISH FARMING

High Nature Value farmland

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Until recently, the mixture of grassland and heath vegetation characteristic of much of Ireland, grazed in an extensive way with low stock densities, provided a relatively stable habitat for insects, mammals and birds. And despite the developments in farming, forestry and peat extraction that have reduced its extent and quality, there are still areas of farmland that have the potential to support rare species such as the crough, corncrake and marsh fritillary butterfly.



Richard T. Mills.



Eric Bignal.

The outstanding landscape of Connemara is a world-renowned example of a High Nature Value farmland area.



Liam Lysaght

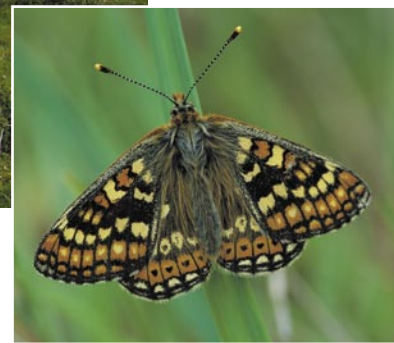
The wildlife value of heathlands benefit from a low level of grazing by livestock.



Eric Bignal.



The marsh fritillary is the only species of butterfly in Ireland that is protected under the EU Habitats Directive. Its survival is dependent on the continuation of light summer grazing of cattle on semi-natural grassland. Either an increase or total cessation of grazing will result in the loss of this species.



Robert Thompson.



Eric Bignal.

Past and current pressures on High Nature Value farmland in Ireland

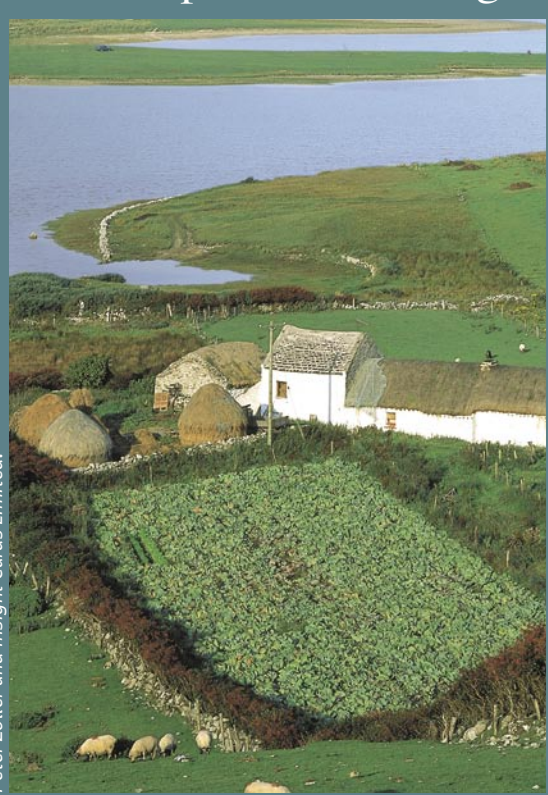
Land-use in Ireland has had a turbulent history so we should be under no illusions about centuries of stability during which farming and wildlife were in harmony.

But it is true that the high nature value of some of Ireland's agricultural areas is a legacy from a time when farming was at a subsistence level, when a typical farm would have reared livestock, have grown oats and potatoes, and kept hens and ducks. Farm labour would be cheap and plentiful and living conditions often poor. Income was low but there were few alternatives.

Over the past forty years this has been replaced with commercial farming, moving more and more towards sheep-dominated enterprises in HNV farming areas. This would have happened despite subsidies although the changes would probably have been slower.

In the past if a farmer wanted to stay at home he had no choice other than subsistence farming. Today there are an increasing number of options including part-time farming and now, with the Single Farm Payment, potentially reducing farming activity to the absolute minimum. The financial returns from farming are low compared with off-farm work and there is little incentive for young people to go into agriculture. At the same time the current generation of farmers isn't getting any younger and when they go much of the resistance to change will be removed, and the knowledge lost.

'Picture postcard' Donegal



Peter Zoller and Insight Cards Limited.

Donegal 2005



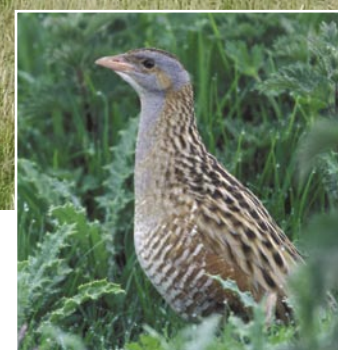
Eric Bignal.

Ireland's attraction for tourists is heavily based on its 'traditional' agriculture and landscape. Postcards in Donegal make much of thatched cottages, corn stacks and mosaics of tillage and hayfields, such as here at Magherorarty, none of which now survive.

Cutting grass and rushes at the right time are of critical importance for the survival of the corncrake.



Dave Suddaby.



Eddie Dunne.

Why should we conserve High Nature Value farmland in Ireland?

In 2004 the Environment Ministers of the Council of Europe agreed not only to identify all HNV farming areas in their territories by 2006 but also to protect a significant proportion of this by 2008. But even without this commitment, there are other good reasons why HNV farmland should be protected: -

- Ireland has a legal responsibility and is committed to maintaining in (or restoring to) so-called "positive status" all the SPAs and SACs designated under the Birds and Habitats Directives.
- Ireland's attraction for tourists is heavily based on its "traditional" agriculture and landscapes. Postcards in Donegal make much of the thatched cottage, corn stacks and mosaic of tillage and hayfields at Magherorarty, none of which now survive. Some might see this as being as viable as the donkey (also a recurring feature of postcards) but mountain sheep and cattle on the hills are rapidly going the same way.
- Irish food is more and more being marketed as the product of a green, healthy "natural" countryside and HNV farmland actually reflects this reality on the ground.



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Liam Lysaght.

Might mountain sheep and cattle on hills go the same way as the donkey?

Predictions for the future

Although it is difficult to predict, short-term trends in farming in HNV areas are likely to include more intensive use of the green land, a shift to higher output breeds and a reduction or even a cessation in the use of the hills and mountains. Farmers in marginal (HNV) areas now have the greatest incentive to cease or reduce production.

A longer-term scenario might be: -

- A small core of full time, specialised, commercial and highly mechanised farmers with large amalgamated farms, concentrating activities on the better ground to maximise output.
- "Part-time" farmers working full-time off farm. Again concentrating on the best ground, housing livestock and using contractors for cultivation and silage.
- "Lifestyle" farmers generally low-input / low-output and drawing the Single Farm Payment, Compensatory payments, REPS and forestry payments - many older farmers in the marginal areas are already in this position.
- Farmers who do the absolute minimum possible because of the incentive of the Single Farm Payment and the pressure of falling market prices. The extent to which this may become a reality is unclear. What is certain is that it is most likely to happen in HNV farming areas where farming without support is uneconomic.

Acknowledgement

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Farming in HNV areas is part of the rich cultural tradition of Irish rural life, and should not be lost.