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What is SUAS?

- The Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) is a pilot project with the objective of developing innovative and sustainable solutions to the economic and environmental challenges facing farmers and communities in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands. SUAS is funded by The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) through the European Innovation Partnerships initiative (EIP) under the Rural Development programme 2014 – 2020.
- The unenclosed land in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands is of high value for biodiversity and is of European conservation importance for habitats and birds. This is recognised by the designation of a substantial area of the uplands region as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA).
- Recent research carried out in the Wicklow/Dublin uplands has identified the poor-to-bad conservation status of the area which is linked to the decline in upland farming activity. Poor economic return is the main reason upland sheep farmers are reducing their upland activities.

The SUAS Project has developed has developed the following to address the decline in habitat quality;

- Introduced commonage groups to facilitate better management and cooperation among farmers on commonage areas.
- SUAS has demonstrated the need for habitat surveys to determine the habitats present and their condition as this information is not currently available. Management plans need this baseline data to determine the actions required to improve habitat quality.
- SUAS has trialled and demonstrated various habitat management techniques including;
 - Bracken Spraying, bracken bruising, controlled burning, mechanical cutting/mulching of strong heather & gorse, hand cutting in difficult to access locations, reintroduction of cattle grazing, native tree planting in upland gullies to improve water quality & biodiversity, infrastructure repairs to make it safer for farmer access.

- SUAS is demonstrating how to develop appropriate grazing management plans that are site specific and will deliver improved management. This includes stock type, times the stock are on the hills and the actual areas where they graze while up there.
- SUAS has developed training courses for farmers to increase their knowledge about habitat and their benefits to allow them to fully engage in the development of habitat management plans. Training courses for specific actions has also been developed and delivered.
- Excessive burning of heather has been an issue in the Dublin hills, driven by changes in farming practices and by changes to legislation on dates it is allowed. SUAS is trying to provide alternative management practices to farmers and to demonstrate the benefits of having stronger vegetation from a habitat point of view. We need to reward the farmers for providing this habitat as in a lot of cases it may reduce animal performance..
- SUAS is currently working with NPWS on a number of habitat restoration projects. The aim is to determine what actions are required, can they be delivered by farmers and what will this restoration cost. The projects include drain & gully blocking and bare peat revegetation which are major issues in the Dublin hills.

SUAS has generated good working relationships between the various stakeholders in the uplands, including farmers, NPWS, agricultural advisers and ecologists, all of who are essential to have working together to deliver the required management.

All these findings from the SUAS Project will be delivered back to the Department of Agriculture to influence what future Agri-environment schemes and regulations are required to actually deliver better quality upland habitats.