



NRN NEWS

connecting communities, growing our future

SPOTLIGHT

Nineteen local projects shortlisted to proceed to the second round of the European Innovation Partnerships Initiative (EIP) attended a workshop, organised by the National Rural Network, in Portlaoise on 14 March. Pictured are some project members, with members of the NRN, in a session aimed at assisting them in development of a Project Plan.



Workshop Helps EIP-Operational Groups Move Towards Implementation

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) held an information workshop in conjunction with the NRN for the 12 Operational Groups successfully selected from Open Call One of the EIP-AGRI (European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability) initiative, in the Tullamore Court Hotel, Co. Offaly on 27 February 2018.

Over 70 delegates attended this workshop, which included a networking session. A variety of presentations was given to help the delegates moving into the implementation stage of the EIP process.

Fintan O'Brien of DAFM opened the conference and was followed by Dr. Maura Farrell who presented on behalf of the NRN on the network's role in supporting the Operational Groups throughout the duration of their projects. Ciara Conlon of DAFM explained about the new GDPR Regulations, Michelle Harrison gave an overview of audit and compliance requirements, while Angela Corcoran and Margaret Murray of the EIP Division spoke about the Terms & Conditions of the Scheme and how the successful teams would manage invoicing and

other financial issues. Pat Kennedy, owner and digital strategist at eTownz, spoke on the topic of communications and web design. Following a Questions & Answers session, Dr Ronan O'Flaherty of DAFM closed the seminar, wishing all teams success in their work over the coming years.

Dr. Shane Conway designed and produced posters on behalf of the NRN, on display at the event, detailing the key aims, objectives and activities of each project. The 12 posters also featured, as sources of information and inspiration, at the EIP-AGRI 'Call 2: Stage 1' workshop held for the successful groups from the second Open Call of the EIP Initiatives on 14 of March 2018 in the Killshin Hotel, Portlaoise. Dr. Conway and Dr. Farrell have also recently created a new interactive 'Irish EIP-AGRI Operational Groups Storyboard' database based on the information detailed within each of these 12 posters. This Storyboard combines a geographical map of Ireland with user-friendly interactivity as well as an infographic for each project, and can be found in the EIP-AGRI section of the NRN website: www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/innovation



The National Rural Network (NRN) recently held an information seminar on the EU Life Programme in The Sheraton Hotel, Athlone. The EU LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. The aim of the seminar was to promote the LIFE Programme and how Irish projects have contributed to the protection and sustainability of the Irish environment.

For more information about EU LIFE Programme Information Seminar and to access the presentations visit www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/news

Case Study: Diversifying the Family Farm

Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 has allocated over €4 billion for a range of supports, schemes and programmes, which can be utilised by farming and rural communities. Many initiatives supported by the RDP 2014-2020 allow farm families to consider new initiatives, essential for the future viability of the family farm. One such family are the Mulhalls of Coolanowle Country House and Organic Farm, situated on the Carlow and Laois border. Dr. Farrell (NUI Galway and the National Rural Network) recently visited the farm and met Bernadine and Jimmy Mulhall and members of their extended family also involved in the family business.



Proprietor Jimmy Mulhall and his son Eddie showing off some of Coolanowle's organically farmed produce

Traditionally a dairy farm, Bernadine and Jimmy made the decision in the early 2000s to improve their chances of viability by converting the family home into a guest house. Hard work, commitment and innovative thinking are more than apparent when speaking with the Mulhall family who created an intimate guest house business as a starting point for a longer-term farm diversification venture. Dr. Farrell suggests that "in considering diversification, utilising what is available on-farm is often the best starting point" and this is exactly what Bernadine and Jimmy achieved as they went about converting two

limestone cottages and original cow byres to expand their farm accommodation business. In more recent years, renovations of an on-site barn resulted in the development of a purpose-built conference and banquet centre, which allows Coolanowle House to cater for weddings, conferences and events.

A key enhancement of the farm business was the decision to convert the 100 hectare farm to organics in the early 2000s. Rearing organic beef, lamb, pork, bacon and chicken resulted in the need for a specialised processing unit on-site, which now employs three butchers for slaughtering at the farm. Over the past fifteen years, the Mulhalls have produced a high-end organic product, which Jimmy explained "holds no trace of antibiotics, animal growth hormones or genetically modified organisms." Though still dealing mainly in meat, Bernadine added that an "ever growing demand for raw milk" has pushed them to invest heavily in a new dairy system, which should enhance their business even further. Initial success in a local organic retail trade was assisted by Laois LEADER (now Laois Partnership) which approved the Mulhall's LEADER grant to purchase a custom built mobile unit. Following on from that success, Jimmy and Bernadine now sell Coolanowle Organic Meat on-line, nationwide and at Coolanowle Farm.

In recognition of their endeavour for perfection, the Mulhall family has received a host of awards including - most recently 'Best Laois Business for Tourism and Hospitality' at the 2017 Laois Business Awards. Previously selected as an Organic Demonstration Farm for DAFM and Teagasc, the Mulhall Farm is a model of success and an excellent example for any other farm families considering diversification.

To find out more about Coolanowle Country House and Organic Farm please visit: <http://www.coolanowle.com/>

Managing Grasslands Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS)



Grazing platform: an intensively managed grassland

Though the visual impact of Ireland's seemingly endless fields of lush green grass is the basis of our international renown as the Emerald Isle, from a farmer's perspective the essential attribute of grassland is its productivity - the capacity to carry and support stock. John Feehan's book *Farming in Ireland* highlights how, in the last half century, major changes in Irish agriculture have substantially increased the productivity of grassland. In particular, the vast majority of grasslands throughout Ireland are now being actively improved by means of ploughing or reseeded, with the use of particular additives (such as lime) and fertilisers also dramatically increasing output. Such steps, combined with the use of high-yield cultivars such as rye-grass and clover, have allowed farmers to increase their stocking rates and farming intensities. A downside of such progress, however, can be a decline in the diversity of grassland species.

Ireland's RDPs have sought to minimise these negatives. It is recognised that even at local level there is a huge variance in soil types which in turn support many different farm enterprises, habitats and plant species, all with their individual part in the make-up of Ireland's landscape. Under the RDPs, the aim of preserving species-rich grassland diversity has been strongly supported by Irish farmers. For example, under GLAS there are approx. 37,600 farmers managing approx. 300,000 ha. of Low Input Permanent Pasture (LIPP) and a further 16,200 farmers managing traditional hay meadows.

To be eligible for the LIPP action, participants are required to select a suitable pasture containing a minimum of four grass species (excluding Ryegrasses) e.g., cocksfoot, timothy, bent grasses, fescues, sweet vernal or Yorkshire fog. It must also contain a minimum of three other non-grass plant species, such as chickweed and trefoils, reasonably dispersed throughout the field. Overall, ryegrass cover must not exceed 30% of the total.

Cavan dairy farmer Michael Smith says, "The majority of my farm would be classified as heavy soil - some of the land has never been reseeded in my lifetime. You can see in those areas, that there is more wildlife activity than on the intensively grazed milking platform". Michael is a GLAS participant and a portion of his farm is managed under LIPP. He adds "Grass is cheaper than meal and of higher quality than silage in the pit. It is important to acutely manage the grass on the farm to get cows out when you can, even if it is for a few hours in the early stages of the year".

Michael practices grass measuring, and records grass growth rates on his milking platform throughout the year. He uses the data collected as a decision support tool, and identifies paddocks suitable for grazing, silage or even reseeded in the case of poorly performing paddocks. Grassland management, therefore, is a key efficiency on his farm.

For more information please see www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/biodiversity



Bord Bia has been auditing and certifying good farming standards for over twenty years through its Quality Assurance Schemes.

Origin Green is Ireland's sustainability programme for the food and drinks industry, responding to increasing market demand in this area by incorporating sustainability initiatives and measures into the existing Quality Assurance audit infrastructure. The Sustainable Assurance Schemes now extends to responsible farm practices in areas of biodiversity including water usage, energy, feed and fertiliser.

Through its audit process, Bord Bia collects information on each individual farm. Farms that are part of Sustainable Quality Assurance Schemes are audited



Globally the food and drinks industry faces enormous challenges

Quality Assurance plays a fundamental role in promoting Irish food and horticulture both at home and abroad, and provides a platform for consumer promotion of product quality. The schemes are built on best practice in farming and processing, current legislation, relevant industry guidelines and international standards. Food safety, traceability, welfare, health and safety and environmental protection are the cornerstone of these standards. In 2012, these schemes were expanded to formally integrate sustainability metrics around carbon footprinting and over time are transitioning to focus on both Quality Assurance and sustainability on farms, i.e. Origin Green.



Over 50,000 farmers are members of the Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS)



The Sustainable Egg Quality Assurance Scheme (SEAS cover 97% of Irish egg production)

every 18 months, when data is compiled regarding the sustainability performance of each farm. Each farmer is subsequently given a feedback report, which outlines ways in which the farmer can improve sustainability on their farm. With the permission of the farmer, data collected as part of the Sustainable Assurance audit is combined with data from two national livestock databases: the DAFM's Animal Identification & Movement system (AIMS) and the Irish Cattle Breeders Federation (ICBF) database. The farmer receives further feedback reports on the farm's current performance and re-assessments take place every 18 months. These reports enable farmers to make informed decisions on how to improve their on-farm sustainability, efficiency and viability.

Currently over 50,000 farmers are members of the Sustainable Beef and Lamb Assurance Scheme (SBLAS). This represents 90% of all beef produced in Ireland. Additionally, over 17,000 farmers are participating in the Sustainable Dairy Assurance Scheme (SDAS) with 90% of Ireland's dairy farmers certified participants of this scheme. The Sustainable Egg Quality Assurance Scheme (SEAS) covers 97% of Irish egg production, while the Sustainable Horticulture Assurance Scheme (SHAS) has recently launched and will transition 281 certified horticulture scheme members over to this revised standard. The transition of the Bord Bia Pigmeat and Poultry Quality Assurance Scheme to Sustainable Assurance Schemes will be complete in mid-2018. Globally, food and drinks industries face enormous challenges, such as increased demand for raw materials

that put a strain on natural resources. Climate change is the single biggest potential factor to affect Irish food production. In light of this, Origin Green is establishing and improving the infrastructure and framework required to facilitate Ireland's ambition of becoming a leader in sustainability.



Over 170,000 assessments have taken place on beef and dairy farms

Since the commencement of the Origin Green Programme, over 170,000 carbon assessments have taken place on beef and dairy farms. It has been acknowledged by Bord Bia that if all Beef and Dairy farms currently performing below average were to meet the current average, this could potentially reduce the total emissions from agriculture by 7%.

“Quality Assurance plays a fundamental role in promoting Irish food and horticulture both at home and abroad, and provides a platform for consumer promotion of product quality.”

See www.nationalruralnetwork.ie for more information.

Fourth gathering of NRN Advisory Sub-Committees

The National Rural Network (NRN) hosted its fourth meeting of the "Biodiversity and Environmental Challenges and LIFE Programme" Advisory Subcommittee and "Climate Change" Advisory Subcommittee jointly on 9 March 2018.



Seamus Barron (DAFM) addressing NRN Advisory Sub-Committee

The NRN established Advisory Subcommittees to support the effective engagement of the NRN with the Rural Development Programme (RDP 2014-2020). The NRN Advisory Subcommittees achieve the aim by:

- Providing advice and support to the NRN implementation group;
- Sharing learning and identifying best practice examples;
- Identifying key thematic issues of concern to the network;
- Advising on the measurement of outcomes; and,
- Providing recommendations for the annual NRN Action Plan to improve its implementation and reach.

Our most recent meeting had a high calibre of speakers who presented on topics including CAP post 2020, CAP and the Environment and the GLAS Evaluation Project. David Buckley, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), presented on the Public Consultation on the shape of Common Agricultural Policy post 2020, which took place in early 2018. David outlined the key themes and challenges to the CAP post 2020. These were identified in the CAP Communication published by the European Commission and outlined questions arising in terms of Ireland's position and response.

Seamus Barron, DAFM, presented on the environmental challenges agriculture faces, including from increasing cattle numbers and discussed measures under the present CAP (2014-2020), pillars 1 and 2 of which aim to address these challenges.

Environmental Economist at ADAS, Mike Image presented on the progress of the evaluation of the Green Low-Carbon Agri-environment Scheme (GLAS) over the lifetime of the scheme. Mike gave an overview of the outputs of the GLAS evaluation project to date which included presenting the results of the GLAS baseline survey (which addresses biodiversity issues) and the baseline modelling report on water quality/ climate change. These can be downloaded from the DAFM website*.

Following the presentations, the NRN Advisory Sub-committee experts discussed and debated the way forward for the agricultural industry post 2020.

*<https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/ruralenvironment/ruraldevelopmentprogrammerdp2014-2020/>

West Women in Farming Encourage Farm Diversification



Representing the NRN at the meeting were from left to right, Dr. Shane Conway, James Claffey and Dr. Maura Farrell.

West Women in Farming Ireland (WWFI), in conjunction with Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), hosted an event at the GMIT campus in Galway, in January. The key objective of the occasion was to encourage and motivate women involved in Irish agriculture to consider diversification and contribute to the viability of the farm and the sustainability of their own rural community.

Chaired by Mairead Lavery of the Irish Farmers' Journal, Dr. Maura Farrell (NRN and NUI Galway) provided the initial presentation, which explored the challenges and opportunities facing Irish rural women both on and off-farm. Speakers from County Galway Credit Unions, Roscommon LEADER Partnership, Orla Casey of Momentum Consulting and Gerard Moyle, Assistant Principal Officer Department of Revenue, all raised issues of funding, training and education.

The audience on the day were highly motivated and encouraged by entrepreneurial women, such as Grace Roche of Pretty Bird; Margaret Shepard of Connemara Organic Seaweed and Ami Madden of Goat Ireland, who provided examples of successful businesses based on strategic planning and courage. Women such as Ursula Kelly of Cormac Tagging; Teresa Roche of Kylemore Farmhouses and Kirsty McCann of Foran Equine all epitomised what women in agriculture can achieve through farm diversification endeavours; which are advantageous to both the sustainability of the family farm and the development of rural Ireland.

The National Rural Network congratulates WWFI, and in particular Martina Calvey, Ciara Shields and Paula Mullen, who not only hosted a highly motivating and successful event, but provided a platform for successful and entrepreneurial women from the west of Ireland.

For further details on the event visit: <http://bit.ly/2DDzh4I> and <http://bit.ly/2FSh3Ok>

Simplification of the LEADER Programme



Dympna Harney (DRCD), Dr. Maura Farrell (NRN), Declan Rice (CEO Kilkenny LEADER Partnership) and Gabriel O'Connell (Monaghan Integrated Development).

The LEADER Programme has played a key role in the development and sustainability of rural areas throughout the EU over the last twenty seven years. As a result, its success is unquestionable. However, for users and implementers there are numerous elements of the LEADER Programme which remain complex and difficult. Consequently, the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), in conjunction with the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) have implemented steps to simplify the LEADER approach, starting with the dissemination of a LEADER survey to all Local Action Groups currently implementing the programme.

Following over 700 survey responses, DG AGRI called together a group of experts in the field of the LEADER approach and delivery to add further simplification priorities for the future of the LEADER Programme. Dr Maura

Farrell represented Ireland's NRN by contributing to the discussion prior to attending an open workshop entitled 'Putting Simplification into Practice' in Brussels on 7 February. The event was also attended by Kilkenny LEADER Partnership CEO, Declan Rice, CEO at Monaghan Integrated Development, Gabriel O'Connell, and Dympna Harney representing the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD).

The workshop developed ideas on harmonisation of LEADER delivery systems with LEADER principles, controls and sanctions, while also considering improving delivery at the Local Action Group (LAG) level. Key discussions at the event also revolved around preparatory and technical support; multi-sectoral and integrated approaches; selection of Local Development Strategies & project approvals and possible solutions to ensure timely implementation of LEADER on the ground.

Reflections from the 10th NRNs Meeting in Germany

Donna Cleary, Development Officer, working on the LEADER Rural Development Programme for Ballyhoura Development CLG, attended the 10th National Rural Network meeting in Neuhardenberg, Germany in March. The meeting included project visits to a number of LEADER programme funded projects in Trebnitz including an education and exchange centre, a community shop and museum. The trip also included a number of themed workshops relating to rural mobility, digital villages and smart supply chains. As part of the NRN meeting, participants also visited the biggest solar park in Europe and a tourism project called e-bike friendly regions. They also visited an agri-research centre and learned how advances in technology are being used in farming. "Particularly interesting is the use of drone technology in farming and digital mapping of farms to ensure greater uptake of environmental initiatives on farms," said Donna.

"It was a great opportunity to see local LEADER projects in Eastern Germany and to learn how other European neighbours are implementing LEADER across the EU. Too often development officers are caught up in the administration of the programme, so the opportunity to learn from our European neighbours was a very welcome experience".

"I returned home; confident that our projects here in Ireland are innovative in their nature; that we have a strong history of community development and we can be assured of our own approach and support of community led local development. We have to always be cognisant of the fact that we are delivering for our communities and we continue to support them to be resilient, innovative and adaptive in what is the changing nature of rural development".

"My thoughts - that information sharing is as important at national level as it is at Development Officer Level. We could investigate an exchange programme," said Donna.

Third Thematic Group Meeting on Smart Villages

The third European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) Smart Villages meeting was held in Brussels on 21 February 2018. This Thematic Group (TG) meeting focused on digital innovation and the development and provision of digital services in rural areas and communities was discussed.

The Thematic Group on Smart Villages explores how rural services can be improved and made more sustainable and innovative through the deployment of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools and/or by supporting community-led actions and projects.

From the outset of the meeting, participants were encouraged to think beyond the need to wait for a perfect broadband infrastructure; many examples throughout the meeting illustrated this point.

The meeting investigated the practical steps for developing digital innovation in rural areas, including how to find the right digital solutions, how to set up effective rural digital hubs and how to identify and develop skillsets. ENRD has developed the Smart Villages Portal that provides links and case studies to many networks and initiatives across Europe.

For full details of the meeting, visit https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/3rd-meeting-thematic-group-smart-villages_en. The European Network for Rural Development will hold a seminar on Smart Villages in Brussels on 22 May 2018.

What is the NRN?

The NRN is a membership network for farmers, agricultural advisors, rural communities and others interested in rural development.

It provides up-to-date and conferences to maximise the beneficial outcomes of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 for rural stakeholders.

The NRN is managed by a consortium led by Irish Rural Link in partnership with The Wheel, NUI Galway and Philip Farrelly & Co.

The NRN aims to:

- increase the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of rural development;
- improve the quality of implementation of rural development programmes;
- foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas.

The NRN is focusing on specific themed areas over the coming years:

- BIODIVERSITY
- CLIMATE CHANGE
- EU LIFE
- EIP-AGRI
- LEADER
- VIABILITY AND COMPETITIVENESS OF FARMING COMMUNITIES

For more information visit www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

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Join the National Rural Network (NRN) by signing up on our website www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

Once you have joined, you will receive monthly email updates on the RDP, the LEADER initiative, best practice case studies and more.

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T: 090 - 6482744

E: info@nationalruralnetwork.ie

W: www.nationalruralnetwork.ie

National Rural Network
Unit 2A Moate Business Park,
Clara Rd, Moate,
Co. Westmeath
N37 W9R0
Republic of Ireland



Rialtas na hÉireann
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Ireland's EU Structural and
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The European Agricultural
Fund for Rural Development
Europe investing in rural areas