

**Opening Statement by Colm Hayes Assistant Secretary General  
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, to Oireachtas  
Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine.**

**30 January, 2018**

**New Hen Harrier Programme**

**Introduction**

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to address it today on the subject of the new Hen Harrier Programme, which is a new locally-led project funded jointly by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the EU under the European Innovation Partnership initiative. I will explain that particular initiative in more detail later. However, first we should say a little about the Hen Harrier itself.

The Hen Harrier is an open moorland bird-of-prey. Hen Harriers nest on the ground, and their preferred nesting sites are unimproved/unenclosed open moorland and heath/bog habitats. They will also nest in young pre-thicket forestry plantations. It is one of our rarest birds. In Ireland, the population is estimated to be in the region of 108-157 pairs and is declining.

The species is listed in Annex 1 of the Birds Directive, meaning that these birds are subject to special conservation measures which,

amongst other things, require Member States to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for their conservation. In Ireland, these are:

- **Slieve Bloom Mountains** (*Laois and Offaly*)
- **Stacks to Mullaghareirk Mountains, West Limerick Hills and Mount Eagle** (*Cork, Kerry and Limerick*)
- **Boggerahs (Mullaghanish/Musheramore Mountains)** (*Cork*)
- **Slievefelim to Silvermines** (*Limerick and Tipperary*)
- **Slieve Beagh** (*Monaghan*)
- **Slieve Aughty Mountains** (*Clare and Galway*)

Some 4,000 landowners have lands which are designated for the protection of the Hen Harrier, covering an area of 169,000ha. The 'agricultural' area is a lot lower, however – some **57,000** hectares. I should stress at this point that our Department has no role in the designation of land as areas of conservation or protection. This is entirely a matter for the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Most of the rest is forestry and while the Hen Harrier can use pre-thicket forests for breeding and foraging, once the canopy closes the forest is of little use and breaks up valuable open habitat. **53%** of the six SPAs are under forest cover, with significant areas now closed canopy.

As part of our current Rural Development Plan, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine seeks to address a wide range of environmental objectives, involving farmers in different ways and paying for additional actions undertaken and income foregone. The Committee will be familiar with most of these – notably GLAS, the Organic Farming Scheme, the Burren Programme and more recently the Locally Led measures.

GLAS is the main mechanism for addressing these challenges, and conservation of the Hen Harrier is a priority action under that Scheme. Farmers with Hen Harrier habitat qualified automatically for GLAS under Tier One, with some of the highest per hectare payments as well - **€370 per hectare** up to the standard ceiling of €5,000 per annum, with automatic qualification for GLAS Plus as well, should they manage sufficient habitat. GLAS Plus brings potential payment for managing Hen Harrier habitat up to **€7,000** a year.

In terms of the Hen Harrier, GLAS is all about protecting or creating the right habitat conditions. The main way farmers do that is by managing grassland a particular way, incorporating the right balance of heather, scrub and rushes, and reducing fertiliser inputs. It is not about turning your back on the land, this is about active farming and

that is what we pay farmers to do under GLAS. The GLAS measure was designed in close co-operation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, with NGOs like Birdwatch, and with farmer representatives. It has proved hugely successful as regards farmer participation: there are currently 2,674 farmers in GLAS taking the Hen Harrier action and this represents nearly 70% of all farmers with Hen Harrier land. By any standards, this is a remarkable achievement and the scale of this level of co-ordinated intervention could have real impact on the survival of the bird.

However, in developing the current RDP, the Department wanted to build in the possibility for testing different ways of approaching agri-environmental issues on the ground – and this included how we might try to help the Hen Harrier. We wanted to experiment with a more agile model which could be used to test new ways of doing things and, perhaps most importantly, new ways of engaging farmers and involving them much more directly in developing ideas and solutions. We also wanted to explore the potential of more result-based schemes – these are where farmers are paid for the result rather than the action: the better the result, the higher the payment. Hand-in-hand with this comes greater freedom to farm. In thinking about this, we were obviously influenced strongly by the success of the various Burren schemes over the years, which have also been funded by the Department.

The proposal we put to the EU was the **Locally-Led** model. This foresaw a **bottom-up** response to environmental challenge, involving farmers directly in the process, with flexible schemes and incorporating a results-based approach. This fitted well with the Commission's own plans for European Innovation Partnerships, or EIPs, which saw a range of actors working together – farmers, NGOs, scientists, etc – testing new and innovative approaches to a range of challenges, not just environmental ones.

In developing its proposals, the Department was also very conscious of the report and recommendations which issued from this Committee in October 2015. While that report focused largely on the wider question of designation and compensation, we did note the conclusion of the Committee that farmers provide a 'public good' when they work to preserve the Hen Harrier and that they should be paid for that. We also noted the Committee's concern that farmers be involved directly in the design of any conservation measures and in particular Recommendation 9 that 'farmers and farming groups be more involved in the entire process of protecting the Hen Harrier.'

This is the process out of which the new Hen Harrier Programme has grown. It is a **locally-led project**, active in all six SPAs. While funded

and supported by the Department, it is not a Department scheme as such – it is a partnership involving many different players. As well as seeking to protect the future of the bird, it explicitly seeks to create a stronger socio-economic outlook for the agricultural communities in those areas and to promote positive relations with those communities, who have managed these sensitive landscapes for generations. The new Hen Harrier Programme has been designed by a locally-led Project Team working in close collaboration with the farmers on the ground in those areas. A total of 31 separate meetings were held during the design process across the six SPAs, with over 500 farmers attending. The Project Team also consulted with the IFA, IFDL, the ICMSA, INHFA and the ICSA during the design stage. The first four organisations listed also nominated farms to be included in the development process, supplemented by additional farms identified by the Project Team.

Three types of payment are included under the new Programme.

These are:

- A results-based payment
- A supporting actions payment
- A Hen Harrier payment

None of these are area-based payments, and that is one of the innovations. The first is a points-based system, where a farmer gets

paid based on the quality of habitat, and can work to increase that quality and his or her payment every year. The supporting actions payment is to pay for capital works that will improve both the habitat and the farm. The final one, the Hen Harrier payment, is something we have never tried before: it is effectively a bonus-payment to farmers if a successful breeding roost site or nest site is identified on or near their land; or where the outlook for an entire SPA stabilises or improves.

Worked examples show that a farmer with 15 hectares could earn up to €3,000-€4,000 a year, while a farmer with 40 hectares could actually get up to €6,000-€7,000 a year.

The new Programme was launched by Minister Creed on 8 December and since then the Project Team have held seven separate information meetings, with a further three meetings scheduled over the next two weeks. These meetings have been very well attended, with over a hundred farmers at some. Actual applications are well in excess of what we would have expected at this point. Little over a month since the Programme was launched we have almost a thousand validated applications on hand, and a further 127 are being processed.

We have many other EIPs in the pipeline now, the vast majority recruited through open calls, and their imagination and innovation will add enormously to our own learning process and will inform the shape of the next RDP. However, the Hen Harrier programme is by far the biggest single project we have under this heading, with by far the largest budget - €25m.

Chairman, that is all I have to say at present but we are available to take whatever questions Committee members have on any of these matters.

Thank you.