

## Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate

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I'd like to begin by thanking the committee for the opportunity to address you today. My contribution is, hopefully, of relevance to your urgent and important work. Reflecting on how best I can contribute to this work, I felt that our experience of working with farmers, scientists and others to address environmental challenges in the Burren over the past two decades may provide both learning and inspiration.

In the late 1990s the relationship between farming and environmental interests in the Burren was very broken, much as it appears to be today at national level. The main source of frustration was the introduction of SAC designations, which farmers felt severely restricted their freedom to farm and to earn a living. These designations were intended to curb damaging activities to the greatest jewel in Ireland's crown, the Burren, but how could this be done without the support and engagement of those who owned the land, the livestock and the knowledge needed to look after it?

The first, small step to resolving this dilemma was taken by local farm leaders who felt that, with these new environmental challenges, there also had to be opportunities. '*Better to light a candle than curse the dark*' was the strategy. This brave, local leadership quickly unlocked the support of research institutions – UCD, Teagasc and the NPWS - and led to the EU-funded BurrenLIFE project which went on to co-create, with farmers, a blueprint for sustainable farming in the region. The research, and strong local support, in turn unlocked CAP funding via DAFM to enable the roll out of the Burren Programme across 23,000ha of land in the region.

This journey, of which I have been privileged to be part, along with many exceptional colleagues, is still a work in progress, as it must remain. However, much has been achieved: An external evaluation in 2020<sup>1</sup> found that the Burren Programme had generated:

- At least €33m worth of landscape and biodiversity improvements
- A €23m boost to the local economy
- An additional €9.4m in payments to local farmers

But what can we learn from this case study in addressing Ireland's current, deeply interwoven, climate and biodiversity emergencies? Quite a lot I think, and I'd like to distil these learnings under three headings: the 'pocket, head and heart'.

**The pocket:** Farming is a business, but in most cases the farmer is only paid for one of the ecosystem services generated – food – often at the expense of others such as Biodiversity, Water Quality and Carbon for which there is a demand, but not a 'market'. In the Burren we addressed this by developing a simple scorecard to capture these services at field level on a scale of 1-10 and linking these scores to payments. Farmers quickly responded, sometimes very innovatively, to this clear incentive, and were also able to avail of additional capital funding to address particular challenges on their farms – protecting vulnerable springs, removing invasive scrub – further improving their field scores and payments.

Farmers felt respected, they had more freedom to farm and to innovate, payments were seen as hard-earned but fair, unlike the standard ‘compensation’ and ‘penalty-based’ approaches. For the taxpayer, the system offers a guarantee that if a farmer delivers less, he/she gets paid less. For the policymaker, the system generates real-time data on programme impact – which, in the Burren’s case, has been an annual improvement in the region’s environmental health over the past decade, bucking national trends.

There is no reason why such results-based incentives can’t be mainstreamed – the science is there in terms of scorecards for a variety of habitats, species and environmental priorities – including climate. Thanks to this work, much of it led by Dr. James Moran, Ireland is considered to be a European Leader in Result-Based Payments: it is vital that the new CSP meaningfully builds on this reputation.

**The head:** To farm for nature and climate, farmers need better research, advice and support just as they receive if farming for beef or dairy. That this support is provided at a local level is critical – both because farmers have such a strong sense of the local, but also because ecosystem services are very place-specific. In the case of the Burren programme, having a local support office has built a strong sense of pride and ownership among farmers and relieved them of much of the bureaucratic burden that often plagues such schemes.

**The heart:** If any of us are passionate about what we do, we will do it better, and farmers are no different. We urgently need to reimagine the role of farmers as ‘first responders’ to our climate and biodiversity emergencies and encourage them to wholeheartedly embrace this role. In the Burren a local charity, the Burrenbeo Trust, has run stewardship courses in local schools from which several thousand Burren children – the future guardians of this place – have graduated. Monthly walks and talks – often led by local farmers – and a Winterage festival and school on sustainable farming, are among the many initiatives created by Burrenbeo to empower farmers and to build bridges of understanding between them and the wider public.

In 2018, with Bord Bia support, Burrenbeo established the Farming for Nature Ambassadors initiative, identifying exemplary farmers across Ireland and sharing their stories through videos, farm walks and webinars. These farmers, among them Donal Sheehan, are reframing the negative narrative around farming and the Irish environment, reimagining the role of the farmer, and also sharing invaluable knowledge and inspiration among their peers.

If Irish farmers can take more ownership of the environmental agenda and be supported and rewarded as Burren farmers have been, then we can have real hope of Ireland becoming the green heart of the European Green Deal and of creating a brighter future for our rural people and places.

Thank you,

Brendan Dunford.

[www.burrenprogramme.com](http://www.burrenprogramme.com)

[www.burrenbeo.com](http://www.burrenbeo.com)

[www.farmingfornature.ie](http://www.farmingfornature.ie)

<sup>1</sup> AECOM Ltd (2020). Evaluation of the Burren Programme (2021). Prepared for the Dept of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. <https://assets.gov.ie/98196/f13c1130-66d6-4da2-af34-378c92ccb571.pdf>