

Farming for nature and public benefits: exploring viable futures in Northern Ireland

3rd September 2024

Answers to questions raised by participants during the event. Kindly provided by **RSPB Northern Ireland, Natural Capital Solutions and Morris Resource Economics.**

Q1. On farm C (zero graze dairy), how were the indoor cows fed after all the grass was converted to marsh/bog (scenario 2)?

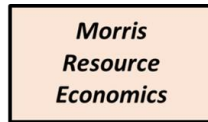
Zero grazing is not feasible on dairy Farm C under scenario 2, neither are the stock numbers and dairy yields required to maintain the financial feasibility of the farm as a dairy unit (especially give the asset structure of the farm). (Similarly for Scenario 1).

Hence scenario 2A was formulated that adopted agro-forestry/silvo-grassland systems, with a 12% reduction in stocking (also scenario 1a is a modified version of scenario 1 that otherwise was not financially viable from a business perspective). The farm is not a contiguous holding. Moving high yielding cows around is not feasible on this fragmented farm – it was once a (smaller) dairy and arable farm. Other options could be considered, including a much smaller and less intensive dairy unit, possibly with beef, with a major and hence a major change in dairy and grassland management, but these went beyond the scope of the enquiry. There is scope to consider this as a option but probably not on this particular farm if it remains a viable dairy farm.

Q2. When presented with the results, what was the farmer willingness to adopt a scenario?

Generally, the grazing livestock farmers considered the modelled scenario options potentially feasible, depending on available Agri-environment Grants and Payments. The intensive dairy and arable farmers favoured ‘greening’ options rather than major farming system change or conversions that took land out of intensive production. Scenario 2 at the farm scale in particular would not enable the intensive dairy and intensive arable farms to

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continue as such, although it was considered that unproductive parts of the farms could be converted to environmental options, and existing woodlands and field margins where present could be enhanced for nature.

Q3. Quantified Ecosystem Services are not a financial input to the farm but to society, so is it fair to include them in a net calculation for each farm/scenario?

The farm business analysis considered revenues and costs from all sources, and resultant net income to farmers. The Values of Quantified Ecosystem Services was not considered from a farm business financial perspective. They were included in the assessment of economic outcomes for each scenario at the individual farm scale, reflecting societal and policy interests.

As reported, other than EFS and related incentives, payments and rewards to farmers for broader sets of ecosystem services in NI, such as carbon credits, biodiversity, air quality and flood/water regulation are not generally available at the moment, although some nascent markets are emerging for these services. A further step in the work would be to explore how these potential economic benefits could be transformed into payments and rewards for farmers, including the option for blending finance from different sources.

Q4. Is there any sign of a government Land Use Framework to help farmers to optimise use of their holdings?

The argument for a Land Strategy for NI was considered by a consortium of stakeholders under the aegis of the Land Matters Task Force (2015) (https://www.nienvironmentlink.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Towards-a-Land-Strategy-for-NI_2015-Main-Report.pdf). The vision was for 'land and landscapes to be managed for the benefit of people's well-being and prosperity, respecting the views of communities, groups and individuals, striving for environmental excellence, and making best use of its multi-functionality' (LMTF, 2015). The independent review of the agri-food sector in NI reiterated calls for NI land strategy (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/independent-strategic-review-ni-agri-food>). As we understand, work has begun within the government to progress a land use strategy/framework for NI.



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Q5. How were these particular study farms selected or approached to participate?

RSPB farm advisers directed us to a list of potential farmers. We wanted to make sure we selected farms to reflect the typical farm types in NI. One of the farmers we work closely with, one of the farmers we had a loose previous association with and two of the farms we had never worked with previously. Availability of data and willingness to share farm business accounts was a big factor given the sensitive nature of some of the data.