

Assembly Questions

AQW 18600/17-22

Mr Gerry Carroll (PBPA - West Belfast) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

10/05/2021 Answered on 24/05/2021

The initial All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP) (2015-20) identified 81 science-based actions to halt the decline of pollinators. All of these actions were delivered by partners, government and non-government bodies, communities and individuals. The plan was supported by over 108 organisations including Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, Ulster Farmers Union, Ulster Beekeeping Association, Translink, NI Water, Lidl, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, local councils, schools and many other businesses.

The AIPP received international acclaim, providing an exemplar of cross-border partnership delivery within a common framework. It has been used by many countries as a template for their own pollinator plans and strategies

The new All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025 has built on these successes and includes an ambitious 186 actions to achieve six objectives to protect pollinator food sources and nest sites on both private and public land.

Two representatives from the Department sit on the AIPP Steering Group, reporting back actions and progress, and promoting local measures. Following the first AIPP, a publication was produced summarising completed initial actions entitled 'Working together for Biodiversity', available to download from the All-Ireland Pollinator website <https://pollinators.ie/resources/>

AQW 18508/17-22

Mr John Blair (APNI - South Antrim) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the destruction of protected wildlife will not be involved in his Department's Bovine Tuberculosis Strategy.

06/05/2021 Answered on 21/05/2021

The proposed bTB (bovine Tuberculosis) Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland aims to reduce, and eventually eradicate, bTB levels by comprehensively addressing all the recognised key factors in the spread of the disease.

Within the development of the Strategy, consideration has been given to the role of wildlife, specifically badgers, as it is widely accepted that badgers act as reservoirs of bTB infection. The Department is of the view that there needs to be some form of badger intervention if bTB spread between badgers and cattle is to be effectively addressed.

The eradication of bTB from Northern Ireland remains one of my top priorities and I have stated that I wish to consult on the new bTB Eradication Strategy, including proposals for wildlife intervention, in the very near future.

Following consideration of the responses to that consultation, it is my intention to progress implementation of the new Strategy, so that we can move towards eradication of this devastating disease from Northern Ireland.

AQW 18172/17-22

Ms Claire Sugden (IND - East Londonderry) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any plans he has to create countryside management schemes, such as those for the planting of hedgerows on farmland, with a view to offsetting carbon emissions.

29/04/2021 Answered on 12/05/2021

My officials are working with farmers and land managers, agricultural industry representatives and environmental stakeholders to co-design a future agri-environment scheme. The scheme will help farmers to deliver a range of environmental outcomes, including improvements in water and air quality, biodiversity and reductions in carbon emissions. The range of measures under consideration includes the planting of hedgerows on farmland as one of the means of offsetting carbon emissions.

The Environmental Farming Scheme currently supports over 5,000 farms via carbon friendly practices including maintaining and establishing native woodland, enhancement of existing / planting of new hedgerows, agro-forestry and peatland restoration.

AQW 18122/17-22

Mr John Blair (APNI - South Antrim) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's work to implement the recommendations of the Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy report.

28/04/2021 Answered on 14/05/2021

My Department and the then Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Michelle McIlveen MLA, supported and attended the launch of the [Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy](#) (SALMS) for Northern Ireland on 21 October 2016 titled 'Delivering our future, valuing our soils', which was published by an independent Expert Working Group (EWG).

Since that launch my Department has been working closely with the EWG and implementing actions associated with the recommendations made in the strategy report.

Significant investment has been made to assist farmers manage their land more sustainably, these include:

- Soil testing and analysis pilots schemes have been delivered across 1,613 farms and covering 49,711 hectares of land and an NI wide scheme is being developed;
- CAFRE is delivering advice to approximately 415 farms through the new Environmental Business Development Group Programme where 20 groups have been set up across the province focusing on sustainable farm systems and helping farmers identify carbon reduction measures and how to improve protection of the environment.
- Forest Service is leading on 'Forests for our Future' aiming to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 and plan to open a new stand-alone Small Woodland Grant Scheme to help farmers integrate woodland on their farms. Also, the Environmental Farming Scheme supports over 5,000 farms via carbon friendly practices including maintaining and establishing native woodland, hedgerows, agro-forestry and peatland restoration.
- The Farm Business Improvement Scheme Capital (FBIS-C) has provided almost £14.5m of grant aid in total to over 3,000 farm businesses over the first two tranches of Tier 1, which has helped support the purchase of a large range of more efficient, precision and emissions reducing technologies. Letters of Offer have begun to issue for the third tranche of Tier 1 FBIS Capital, which has a funding allocation of £15million, following the very positive response in applications received, particularly for Low Emissions Slurry Spreading Equipment.
- The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) will provide approximately £59m of financial aid 3,985 wider level agreements and 775 higher level agreements under the first three tranches of the EFS scheme.

My officials will continue to develop measures of support for farms to play their part in protecting the environment while producing food sustainably. Officials will continue to work on the actions to implement key recommendations of the SALMS report, including those that will help inform the development and implementation of future agri support schemes.

AQW 17658/17-22

Mr John Blair (APNI - South Antrim) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions his Department has had with (i) farmers; and (ii) industry representatives in relation to promoting wildlife-friendly farming techniques.

20/04/2021 Answered on 06/05/2021

Protecting and enhancing our biodiversity and wildlife is a key priority for my Department, as is the delivery of more wildlife-friendly farming. My officials engage with farmers and farming stakeholders on policy initiatives and schemes designed to enhance the natural environment for biodiversity and wildlife.

Through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) my Department delivers Knowledge Transfer, Innovation and Technology Transfer programmes, which aim to improve future performance, sustainability and resilience of the agri-food industry.

My Department's [Environmental Farming Scheme](#) (EFS) supports farmers and land managers to carry out environmentally beneficial farming practices on agricultural land. CAFRE delivers training to all Environmental Farming Scheme participants, including on the wildlife friendly options within this scheme.

CAFRE also deal directly with farmers through Business Development Groups, which provide a training forum that allows sharing of knowledge (peer-to-peer learning) with the aim of improving technical efficiency and environmental performance. Wildlife friendly farming techniques are a key component of the Environmental Business Development Groups.

NIEA is working with a number of partners to develop a series of conservation management plans for our Special Areas of Conservation, involving engagement with key stakeholders over the necessary conservation measures, largely delivered through wildlife friendly farming.

My Department continues to engage farmers and the industry around current and future policy development, along with practical implementation of the necessary measures and this will continue as we move towards delivery of key national and international commitments.

Work is underway to develop the future agri-environment policy framework for Northern Ireland. Engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers, the agricultural industry, and environmental sector, will be required to inform development of future agri-environment schemes and associated policy instruments. Initial meetings with UFU and the Nature Friendly Farming Network have taken place.

AQW 17659/17-22

Mr John Blair (APNI - South Antrim) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to halt the decline of (i) yellowhammers; and (ii) other priority farmland birds.

20/04/2021 Answered on 04/05/2021

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the WANE Act) which places a statutory duty on my Department to maintain lists of priority species requiring conservation action, including priority farmland birds.

DAERA supports monitoring and research on farmland bird species, particularly through work by the British Trust for Ornithology, and the RSPB. This work is used to inform which species are considered priority bird species in Northern Ireland, and provides evidence on the effectiveness of conservation measures being implemented.

My Department also undertakes a range of actions which directly benefit declining farmland birds, of which agri-environment schemes, such as the Environmental Farming Scheme, are the most important. The Wider Scheme EFS(W) has a range of options designed to benefit Yellowhammer and other seed-eating birds. The Higher Scheme EFS(H) has options to manage habitats, such as upland heathland and blanket bog, which are important for upland birds, including breeding waders and threatened birds of prey. My Department has recently commissioned a large project to monitor the impact of EFS on farmland birds.

In addition, DAERA has supported a number of conservation organisations to help priority farmland birds through raising awareness and through species-specific conservation measures.

AQW 17037/17-22

Ms Clare Bailey (GPNI - South Belfast) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department will be supporting the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025.

08/04/2021 Answered on 21/04/2021

The Department has been actively engaged with the development of actions to be included in the 2021-2025 All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, increasing from 81 to 186 actions. These now span across four themes; providing food, safety and shelter for pollinators and also improving our knowledge of populations through research.

Actions will be delivered through various means;

- Working closely with grant funded partners, such as Butterfly Conservation and Buglife, to raise awareness of the plan, and develop pollinator actions into project work plans.
- Engage with Local Biodiversity Officers to promote community based actions such as 'Don't Mow, Let it Grow' initiatives to improve habitat for pollinators.
- Increase the number of businesses, organisations and land owners, to sign up as official All-Ireland Pollinator Plan partners.
- Work with businesses taking DAERA 'Prosperity Agreements' to include actions for pollinators.
- Actively manage NIEA sites and country parks in a sustainable, pollinator-friendly manner.
- Work alongside plant health teams and AFBI to reduce threats from invasive species, and pesticide use.
- Deliver UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme in Northern Ireland to identify population trends, impacts and threats.

Two representatives from the Department sit on the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan Steering Group, reporting back actions and progress. Following the first plan phase (2015-20) a publication was produced summarising the breadth of initial actions completed 'Working together for Biodiversity' available to download from the All-Ireland Pollinator website. <https://pollinators.ie/resources/>

AQO 1265/17-22

Ms Órlaithí Flynn (SF - West Belfast) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures are being taken to protect and encourage the resurgence of native wildlife species.

26/11/2020 Answered on 09/12/2020

There are a range of measures in place to protect and encourage native wildlife and the habitats they depend on. Legislation protects a number of native species, both directly and indirectly, by controlling the pressures and threats to them, such as illegal killing, disturbance and the spread of invasive alien species.

My Department's primary measure to protect and encourage native wildlife is the designation and management of habitats and species in areas important for nature conservation, such as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). These areas and their features are afforded special protection.

In addition, conservation actions for enhancing habitats and species are provided through my Department's Environmental Farming Scheme and Management of Sensitive Sites scheme (MOSS). My Department is currently progressing a comprehensive programme to develop conservation management plans for our SACs, which will define the necessary conservation measures to move the sites towards favourable condition.

My Department maintains lists of priority habitats and priority species which require conservation action and which can occur beyond designated (ie, protected) sites. These are used for regulatory and advisory purposes, e.g, for statutory planning advice and to target incentives for positive action, such the Environmental Farming Scheme and provision of grant-aid to conservation bodies for nature conservation projects through the Environment Fund.

My officials will work with stakeholders, including landowners, conservation bodies, local authorities and other Government Departments to ensure that key actions and practices are encouraged to protect and support our native species.

AQW 10911/17-22

Mr John Blair (APNI - South Antrim) To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impacts that organic farming has on biodiversity.

24/11/2020 Answered on 05/01/2021

A range of studies indicate that biodiversity benefits are enhanced on farms operating to certified organic standards.

By prohibiting use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, certified organic agriculture can enhance the environmental value of crops for invertebrates, farmland birds and mammals. Allowing field margins and headland to develop and flower provides a vital source of nectar for pollinators.

Through regular cultivation, organic crop rotation systems help to avoid soil compaction and excessive weeds, making the land less susceptible to drought and water saturation. Recycling nutrients in manures and composts also benefit soil structure and quality. These practices help to support a diversity of plant species and wildlife.