

# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE OF NATURE RESTORATION LEADERS' FORUM: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Role of Farming in Supporting Nature

The EU Nature Restoration Law sets binding targets for all member states to restore degraded ecosystems, particularly those with the most potential to capture and store carbon and to prevent and reduce the impact of natural disasters. The law aims to restore a wide variety of ecosystems, including agricultural ecosystems and farmed Annex I habitats, and the species they host in order to increase biodiversity; secure the services that nature provides for free, like cleaning our water and air, pollinating crops recycling nutrients and protecting us from floods; limit climate change; and improve Europe and Ireland's resilience in the face of natural disasters and risks to food security.

Ireland must submit a National Restoration Plan to the European Commission in September 2026 that sets out how we will deliver on the targets to 2030, 2040 and 2050. Ireland has adopted a 'Whole-of-Government, Whole-of-Society' approach to drafting and implementing its plan and a series of Leaders' Forums form part of the stakeholder engagement process.

Farmers will be key to ensuring Ireland meets its nature restoration obligations. Given the importance of engaging with farmers as essential partners in biodiversity recovery, and given the many challenges currently facing the agricultural sector, a Farming for the Future of Nature Restoration Leaders' Forum was held in July 2025. This executive summary synthesises the main insights from over 80 farmers, representative farming groups, farm advisors, agricultural educators, policy-makers and agricultural programme leaders who participated in the meeting.

Throughout the forum examples were shared of nature-positive work that is already underway by farmers. Challenges were also shared and outlined. There was a strong consensus that farmers will be willing to undertake the work of nature restoration required by the Nature Restoration Law if they are engaged meaningfully in the process of planning and are supported and resourced to undertake such work on their lands. Ireland's success in achieving its nature restoration targets will depend on the financial security given to farmers, within a system that enhances nature restoration and ensures farm viability.

## Enable Farmers' Restoration Efforts with Financial Security

Participants in the Leaders' Forum emphasised that farmers should be recognised for the public good their work creates through their restoration and protection of nature, in addition to and alongside food production. Participants highlighted that nature restoration efforts often require additional work, risk-taking and flexibility from farmers. In order to ensure farming is maintained as a viable

way of life and that future generations are attracted to farming in a way that supports the objectives of the Nature Restoration Law, the following actions were identified:

- Provide ring-fenced and long-term funding for nature restoration that is additional to existing agricultural budgets and recognises nature restoration as a public good that should be provided for above and beyond CAP schemes
- Guarantee a minimum compensation scheme for baseline participation in any nature-based scheme, eliminating zero-payment scenarios that damage trust and participation
- Consider a suite of funding approaches, including a biodiversity bonus for food products, increased eco-payments within co-ops, nature credits, payments for ecosystem services, etc
- Ensure farmers are paid promptly for their nature restoration work, in order to ensure cashflow and credit for their business
- Address issues with stacking schemes to ensure fair funding and proper additionality for all farmers, including those who are part-time
- Continue to reward measurable ecological outcomes through results-based payment schemes
- Ensure schemes are designed with knowledge of the particular landscape in mind, with adequate numbers of advisors available who are knowledgeable and skilled in nature restoration
- Consider tax-free status for agri-environment payments and tax relief for nature investments, which could transform participation rates and scheme effectiveness
- Ensure that Annex I habitats that are currently farmed must be supported and acknowledged as part of our natural heritage

## Build Trust and Respect through Communication Processes that Recognise and Include the Lived Experiences of Farmers

Participants emphasised that in order to encourage changes in agricultural practices and perspectives to incorporate nature restoration, communication between farmers, State Agencies and Departments should be clear and accessible, ensuring there is capacity to develop and maintain mutual trust and respect.

Participants outlined the following actions:

- Continue to include farmers in meaningful, long-term stakeholder engagement with regards to the drafting and implementation of the Nature Restoration Plan and other nature-related policies

- Expand advisory services with improved farmer-to-advisor ratios, specialised expertise that is relevant to regional areas, and long-term commitment that builds trust while enabling farm-specific guidance
- Provide ambitious, relevant and authentic advice to farmers on nature restoration actions, which align with national policies and targets, build on the best-available scientific evidence, and incorporate the lived experiences of farmers who are already enacting such approaches
- Replace broad national schemes with regionally adapted targets, local champions, local flexibility and decision making, and cluster-based implementation that reflects diverse environmental contexts
- Provide clear, accessible information about schemes and requirements, with locally-based supports on requirements and administration (potentially building on the Local Enterprise Office system but instead focusing on farming)
- Reduce complexity of application processes for farmers to encourage participation in nature restoration actions, alongside the incorporation of improved IT systems and digital supports
- Scale proven successful models like Burren LIFE, Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP and European Innovation Partnerships rather than introducing new nationally-based programmes
- Coordinate frameworks across departments to eliminate duplicate inspections and requirements
- Focus standards and monitoring on supporting farmer successes rather than finding failures, with clear outcomes based assessments that also recognise factors beyond farmers' control
- Maintain farmer autonomy and voluntary participation in schemes for nature restoration

## Education, Training, and Intergenerational Learning

Building on conversations around communication pathways and developing trust, participants highlighted the need for further education and training for farmers and for their advisors. They also highlighted a need to incorporate intergenerational and peer conversations with scientific expertise, through improved advisory services and training programmes. The following actions were identified:

- Expand training programmes across all levels and disciplines to cover enhanced ecological literacy and good agricultural practices to benefit biodiversity.
- Enable farmers to take informed risks in adopting new nature restoration practices, with increased opportunities to visit demonstration farms and see proven methodologies to reduce uncertainty
- Ensure farm advisors are sufficiently knowledgeable in ecology, nature-based solutions, and nature restoration

- Promote mutual learning practices where farmers share on-the-ground agricultural and ecological knowledge (including the potential for citizen science knowledge capturing), while engaging with advisors and researchers
- Build on the successes of discussion groups as ways for farmers to engage in peer and intergenerational learning
- Encourage the establishment of more discussion groups as a way to support knowledge transfer, combine traditional wisdom with new tools and techniques, increase farmer well-being, strengthen a sense of identity and community, and enhance communication pathways for policy-related actions, in particular with regards to nature.
- Consider an apprenticeship scheme to support younger farmers entering the profession and benefitting from intergenerational and cultural knowledge.
- Offer grants and courses in ecological literacy to build farmers' capability to respond to sectoral changes, in particular with regards to nature and climate actions. This could include pre-enrolment training for farmers to understand the actions asked of them within a scheme.

## National Policy alignment in Agriculture, Food Production, Climate, Education and Rural Affairs

Participants identified that policies which seemingly act in competition with one another erode trust of farmers. Furthermore, they outlined that policies that align to benefit both Ireland's food security and the sustainability of rural communities can work to also maintain farming as the foundation of rural life. The following actions were outlined to benefit local consumers and public understanding of food provenance:

- Align climate and nature policies to eliminate contradictory requirements for farmers and ensure that emission targets and climate measures support rather than conflict with nature restoration
- Develop and enact policies that support domestic grain feeding livestock
- Encourage farmer practices that incorporate circular farming systems to retain value locally and benefit both climate and environment
- Improve public understanding of farmers' roles in food production, food quality, and nature restoration, (such as restoring soil health, managing water quality, maintaining biodiverse hedgerows and supporting wildlife) through national curricula, public education, farm visits (such as the Farming for Nature walks) and national communication campaigns. In line with this, support farmers to communicate the value of their work.

- Develop and enact policies that support local food production, such as linking school meals providers and farmers
- Connect farmers with local organisations through community organisations, volunteer programmes, educational partnerships, meals and seasonal activities that build public understanding, while providing support for farmers
- Balance food production to ensure an export-focus does not undermine national food security or create unsustainable market dependencies.

## Nature Restoration Enhances Rather Than Competes with Traditional Farming Practices

Aligning with the above, participants emphasised that farmers' roles as stewards of nature should be shared with the public. In addition, participants wanted to highlight how successful biodiversity recovery requires reframing nature restoration as an investment in long-term farm health, while supporting diversified, resilient farming systems. The following actions were identified:

- Support farm diversification across livestock, crops, plants and habitats, including woodlands, restored bogs and forestry integration, to strengthen environmental outcomes while providing economic opportunities
- Design flexible schemes to allow farmers to direct resources towards the most relevant ecosystem benefits for their land, utilising local knowledge and conditions
- Ensure farming is seen as a viable way of life for future generations who look both towards innovations in farming and to protecting nature
- Highlight the mental health benefits of farming for nature restoration, as an additional benefit to farming practices
- Emphasise and value cultural and linguistic heritage alongside natural heritage, paying particular attention to Gaeltacht areas

## Conclusion

The health of our ecosystems reflects the health of our citizens and economy. Ireland's biodiversity is intrinsically linked to our heritage, language, and identity. The Nature Restoration Law provides an opportunity to reframe farming and agricultural practices as key to solving the biodiversity crisis, alongside our national food security. In order to support Ireland to meet its national nature obligations we should work with and financially support farmers to include nature restoration and protection in their agricultural practices, recognising the value and public good this work entails.