



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage



'The European Agricultural Fund
for Rural Development: Europe
investing in rural areas'.

The Burren Programme (BP) Annual Report

No. 6: April 2021-March 2022

Executive Summary

The Burren Programme (BP) is a locally-led Agri-Environment Climate Measure (AECM) under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2022. It is a 'Hybrid' programme, funding both results-based habitat management and complementary non-productive capital investments. It aims to improve the condition of the natural and cultural heritage of the Burren. The Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) are the main funding authority for the BP, with additional support from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). The BP is overseen by a Steering Group, made up of representatives from the main stakeholders. The BP is managed by a local team based in the central Burren through a contract with DAFM. 11 approved BP Farm Advisors liaise directly with the 321 participating BP farmers and the BP team in the development of BP plans. This report outlines the work and impact of the BP from April 2021 to March 2022 (inclusive) – BP 'Year 6'.

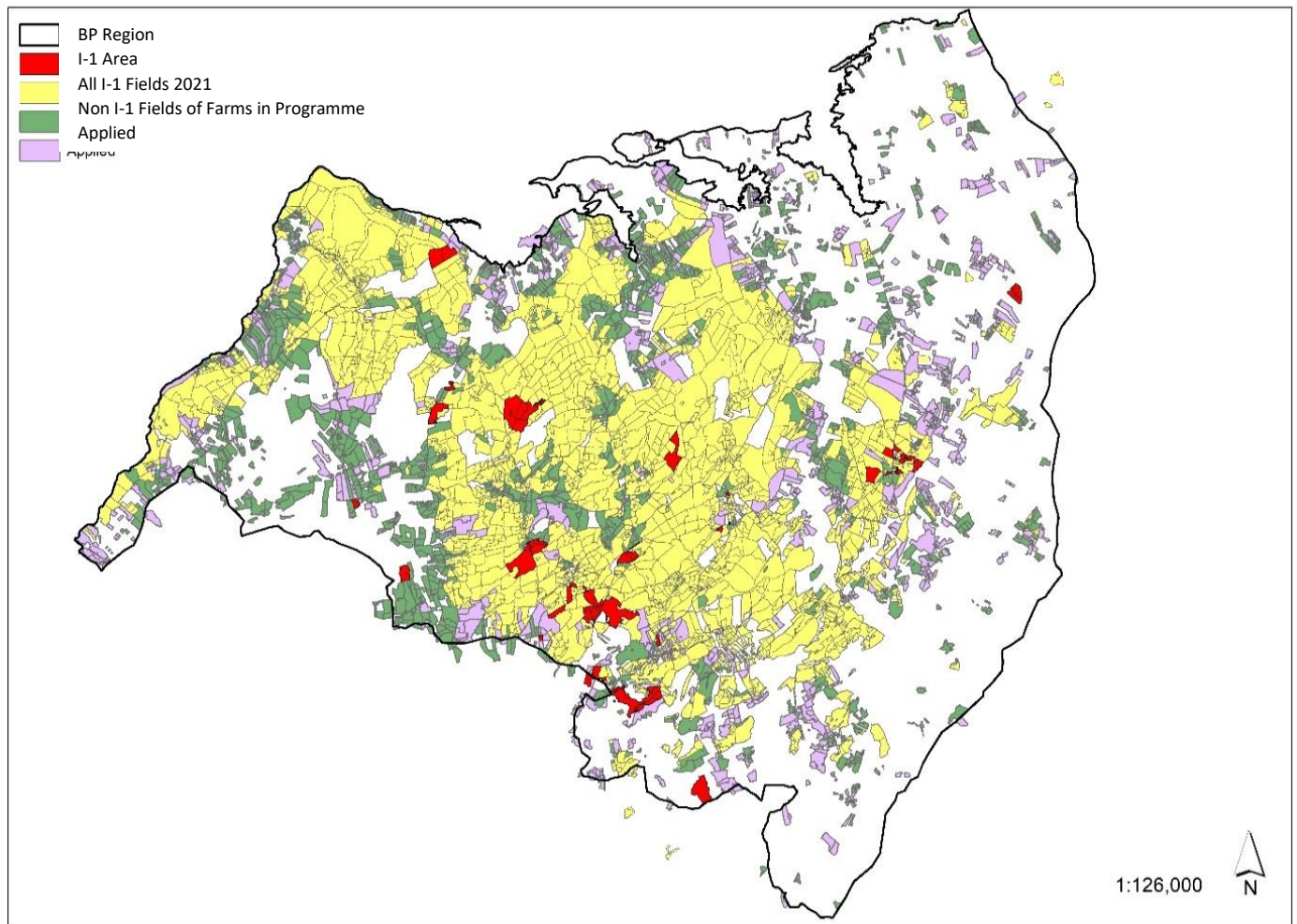
There are three farm planning 'formats' within the BP: the (overarching) Farm Plan, Intervention 1 (I-1) Score Sheets and Intervention 2 (I-2) Work Programmes. Farm Plans act as the farmer's 'contract' with DAFM and these simple, 'overview' plans can be amended once annually. Of the current 321 participant farmers who have signed such plans, 186 joined in 2016 (Tranche 1), 79 in 2017 (Tranche 2), and 56 in 2018 (Tranches 3 & 4). No further recruitment is planned. The total BP area in Year 6 was 22,710ha which equates to an average of 70.75ha of SAC plus Additional Annex I habitat per farm. 59% of this area is 'eligible' under BPS rules and 11,158ha (49%) is assessable under the BP I-1 scoring system. BP encompasses c.70% of the designated land in the three main SACs in the Burren.

I-1 score sheets were submitted for all 321 farmers in Year 6, though 12 of these farmers received no I-1 payment. The total I-1 'results-based' payment approved by the BP team in Year 6 amounted to €1,098,969, or €3,424 per qualifying farmer (range €82 - €10,000), an increase of 27.7% from the Year 5 equivalent (a large increase, due mainly to the use of a new 0-10ha payment band). The average I-1 score across the entire BP area in Year 6 was 7.39, a 1.9% increase from 7.25 in Year 5. Analysis of I-1 data per 'Tranche' recruited shows that I-1 scores have increased annually by a small amount (e.g., for Tranche 1 farms the I-1 score has changed from 7.23-7.26-7.3-7.35-7.48-7.6 in Years 1-2-3-4-5-6). Longer term analysis (2010-21) of a subset of farms which have been in the BP/BFCP since 2010 also shows a steady annual increase, from 6.8 (2010) to 7.74 (2021), a 13.8% increase over 12 years. Improvements in grazing are one of the main drivers of I-1 field score increases, though careful planning and execution of I-2 'conservation support' works on the farm are another major factor.

620 I-2 Work Plans, consisting of 6,518 individual tasks worth €2.278m (average of €3,675 per plan), have been approved by the BP team (110 in Year 6). €1.522m has been approved for payment by the BP team for works completed. An analysis of I-2 work completed shows that Scrub Control accounts for most of the budget (64%), followed by Stone Wall Repair (8.8%), Water Installation (8.4%) and Access Provision (6.3%). Farmers co-fund all I-2 works, contributing an additional €1.037m (40%) to the total cost of I-2 works.

Total works completed since the inception of the BP include the removal of 175ha of encroaching scrub, the repair of 41.8km of stone wall, the installation/upgrade of 33.5k of access tracks and over 270 gates – all of which will help improve the management of key habitats.

The 321 BP farmers, 11 advisors, local and national stakeholders continue to engage well with the BP and contribute to its success, in spite of the challenges brought by the pandemic. The local team have carried out a high level of oversight (I-1 scores checked on 64% of farms, 90% of I-2 works checked) to ensure standards are sustained. The total funding allocated under BP thus far is estimated as €7.08m (avg. €1.18m p.a.) and the anticipated overall spend will be c. €8.5m. The impact of this funding has been continual, gradual environmental improvements under the BP.



The current number of participants in the Burren Programme is 321 and the overall area involved (see image above) is 22,710ha. Farmers joined the BP in three Tranches, beginning in 2016, and were offered 5-year contracts (subsequently extended where necessary). Earlier tranches contained larger farms (c. 90ha in Tranche 1 – see below) though banded payment structures do favour smaller farmers.

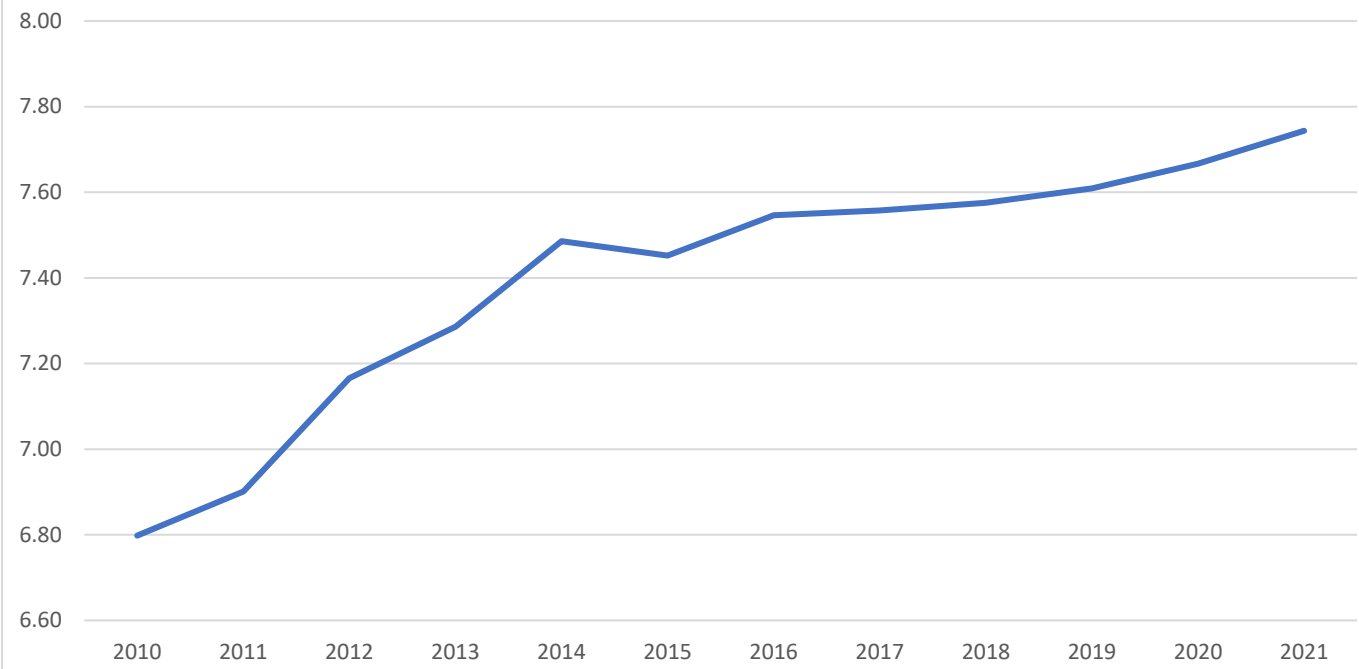
Tranche	Total Digitised Area (ha)	Average area per farm (Digitised ha)	Average area per farm (Eligible ha)	No. of farms
1	17,023.9	91.5	53	186
2	3,625.2	45.9	28.6	79
3 & 4	2,061.2	36.8	22.7	56

Average farm area (SAC plus additional Annex I) per Tranche.

Of the three main SACs in the Burren – which extend over 30,462ha of land – some 21,224ha (69.7%) is now within the BP. This is broken down as follows:

- Black Head – Poulisallagh Complex: 4,101ha of 5,572ha (73.6%)
- Moneen Mountain: 4,876ha of 6,070ha (80.3%),
- East Burren Complex: 12,246ha of 18,820ha (65.1%)

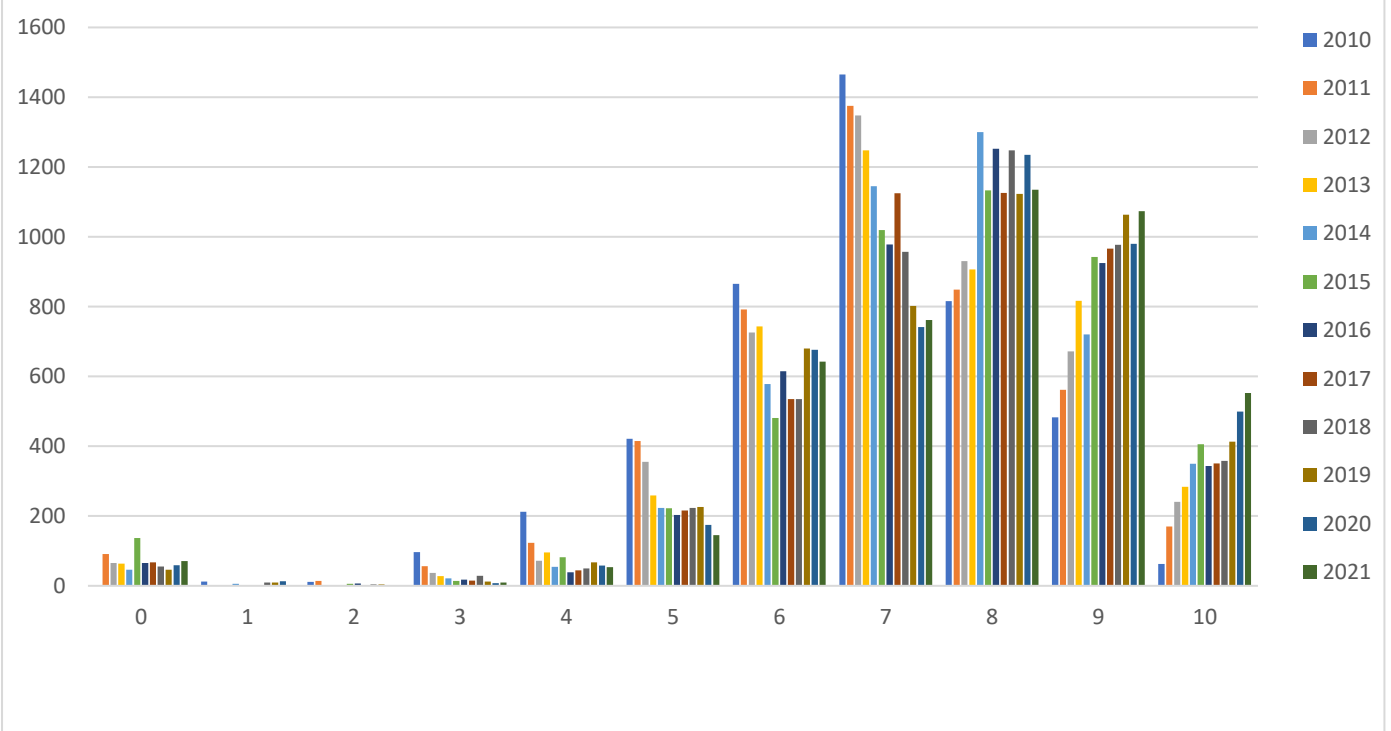
Change in average I-1 Score per annum 2010 - 2021



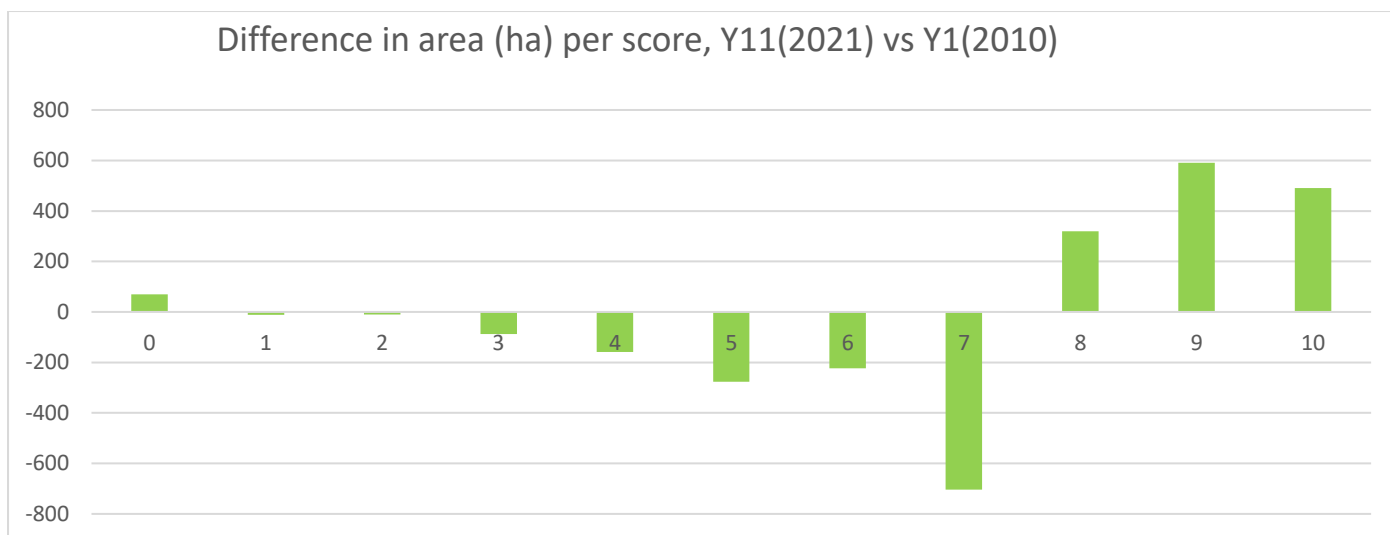
Change in the average I-1 (M1) score between 2010-2021 for all fields which were continuously in BFCP-BP since 2010, calculated on the basis of overall area per I-1 score (subset of 557 fields, 4,446ha).

As may be seen above and below, BP Year 6 resulted in a continuation of Year 5's strong improvement in I-1 scores, continuing a decade long trend of positive environmental performance. Improved incentives, increased I-2 works and better engagement by more farmers, all contributed to this positive outcome, while mild weather conditions also played a part in the improved grazing regimes. Some farms remain stable in terms of I-1 scores, or have seen slight reductions, which is a reminder that complacency can quickly undo much of the good work done thus far.

I-1 (M1) area (ha) per score from Y1 (2010) to Y11 (2021)



I-1 (M1) area (ha) per I-1 (M1) Score, Y1 (2010) to Y12 (2021) (subset of 557 fields, 4,446ha).



Change in the area per I-1 (2021) scores compared with M1 (2010) (subset of 557 fields, 4,446ha).

One of the main drivers of improvements in field scores has been the completion of ‘conservation support actions’ by farmers. Bespoke actions are nominated by the farmer/advisor and approved by the BP team. All actions and associated payments are listed in I-2 plans which include detailed maps. At time of reporting (March 2022):

- 620 I-2 Plans have been approved by the BP Team
- Total amount approved by BP team: €2,278,242 (€3,675 per plan, 620 plans).
- Total Tasks approved: 6,518 or 10.6 per I-2 Plan (620 plans).
- 225 farmers have submitted at least one plan, 153 2 plans, 118 3 plans, 78 4 plans, 34 5 plans and 12 6 plans. This leaves 96 farmers (30%) with no I-2 plan thus far.

Below is a summary of I-2 works completed since the inception of the Burren Programme:

Task Type	Claimed €	% of total	Extent	Additional Info
Scrub Removal - Areas	€704,413.23	45.10%	136.18ha	54.62ha cut using brushcutter
Scrub Removal - Bands	€129,999.74	8.32%	21.86ha	10.26ha brushcutter, 8.88ha chainsaw
Scrub Removal - Paths	€139,419.36	8.93%	17.58ha	87,344m length equivalent
Scrub Removal - Burning / Chipping.	€25,329.05	1.62%	15 tasks	6 chipping tasks, 9 burning tasks
Wall Repair	€ 137,551.88	8.81%	41,799.5m	31,037m internal & 10,762m external
Water Installation	€ 131,584.35	8.42%	610 units	219 troughs, 280 pipe rolls, 30 storage tanks, 13 pumps, 13 harvesters
Access Tracks	€ 98,351.74	6.30%	33,520m	14,508m new, 19,012m upgraded
Fencing	€ 56,616.71	3.62%	36,718m	32,990m post and wire
Gates	€ 59,685.57	3.82%	271 units	108 Burren gates, 163 standard gates
Feed Equipment	€ 19,692.36	1.26%	270 units	194 feed bins, 5 silos, 71 troughs
Habitat Restoration	€ 29,111.77	1.86%	105 tasks	84 bracken control tasks
Livestock Handling Facilities	€ 22,680.31	1.45%	15 units	7 Cattle pens, 6 Crushes
Other (incl. Stone-facing, PPE)	€ 7,458.47	0.48%	18 units	18 sets of chainsaw safety gear

Overview of main types of work carried out under BP I-2 (for tasks completed rather than tasks ‘approved’).

Farmers contribute significantly to the cost of all work (25%, 50% or 75% of costs are met by the farmer). The total value of BP farmer’s contribution towards I-2 works is estimated at €1,036,645 or 40% of the total I-2 budget. This additional contribution would bring the total projected BP value to €9.4m (€6.2m I1 plus €3.2 I-2).

Conclusion

The sixth year of the Burren Programme (April 1st 2021 to March 31st 2022) has been a good one in terms of the ongoing positive impact and reputation of the programme. In spite of the challenges brought about by another year of pandemic, the BP has sustained the progress of previous years: Analysis of I-1 data indicates a continued improved annual increase in I-1 scores, and thus environmental condition on over 20,000ha of the Burren.

Over €1.1m, (an increase of 26%, owing largely to the new banding rate) was approved for Burren farmers in Year 6 through the result-based Intervention 1 payment. This represents a significant amount of additional income to the region's farmers and a significant incentive to continue to improve their agri-environmental management practices. Without this incentive, farmers would be unlikely to put the effort into managing these often-rough-and-remote areas and as a result, the environmental health of the Burren would most likely decline. The carrot and stick structure of I-1 payments – bonus payments for scores of 9 and 10, no payment for scores of 0 - 5, no payment for fields where silage was fed – has helped to drive improved performance, particularly in terms of grazing and feeding.

Over €2.3m worth of capital works have been approved by the BP team since 2016, with over €1.5m of payments issued by DAFM. The BP system of allocating an I-2 fund to each farmer but only paying for works on completion by the farmer, along with the co-funding mechanism for all works, has ensured that this I-2 funding has had a meaningful impact while providing good value for money. The average I-2 plan value is €3,675 - not including the additional c. 40% co-funded by farmers - and contains on average over ten tasks carefully selected and planned by the farmer, advisor and BP team to help improve the site management and I-1 score. All tasks are inspected on completion by the BP team to help ensure a high standard of work and full compliance by the farmer. I-2 planning takes considerable effort, not least in terms of securing permissions for works in a region with multiple-designations.

The economic impact of the programme (worth an estimated €10m over the past six years when I-1 payments, I-2 co-funding by farmers, and payments to the local team are included) remains strong, contributing to the viability of many farms, while supporting an estimated 20 jobs (over and above the local team) in the area. These include work for farm advisors, teams of local contractors (mostly scrub and wall workers), as well as local providers of gates, feedstuffs and hardware supplies. Some farmers have engaged in new activities such as tour and food provision.

The BP team continue to work closely with local partners such as the Burrenbeo Trust who help organise the Burren Winterage School. Good, respectful working relationships thankfully continue to exist between all BP stakeholders. The BP team would like to thank all of those who contributed to work of the programme over the past year: DAFM and NPWS for their ongoing funding and support, our PSG group, farmers and advisors.



Image: Burren Winterage Cattle Drove 2021 on the farm of BP participants Frank and Mary McCormack