

# SUAS Project

## Annual Report

November 2019



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## **Introduction**

The Sustainable Uplands Agri-environment Scheme (SUAS) is a pilot project funded by The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) through the European Innovation Partnerships initiative (EIP) under the Rural Development programme 2014 – 2020. The objective is to develop innovative and sustainable solutions to the economic and environmental challenges facing farmers and communities in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands. The project commenced in 2018 and will run until December 2022.

The project is open to commonages and non-commonage upland areas in the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains. There are various ownership types in the area on similar type habitats and they are all open onto each other, so it was decided that while most of the area is commonage, the non-commonage areas should also be catered for under the same project.

## **Project Team**

### **Operation Group**

Wicklow Uplands Council (WUC) is the lead partner with Teagasc on the SUAS Project. A new subsidiary company of WUC, called WUC-SUAS, was formed with Pat Dunne, Sean Byrne and Tom Byrne as directors, for the operation of the project. Pat Dunne of WUC represents the Lead Partner, on a 12 member Operational Group to implement the project. Each member was selected on the basis of having the required technical expertise and experience in his/her specific area of responsibility, for the successful delivery of the project.

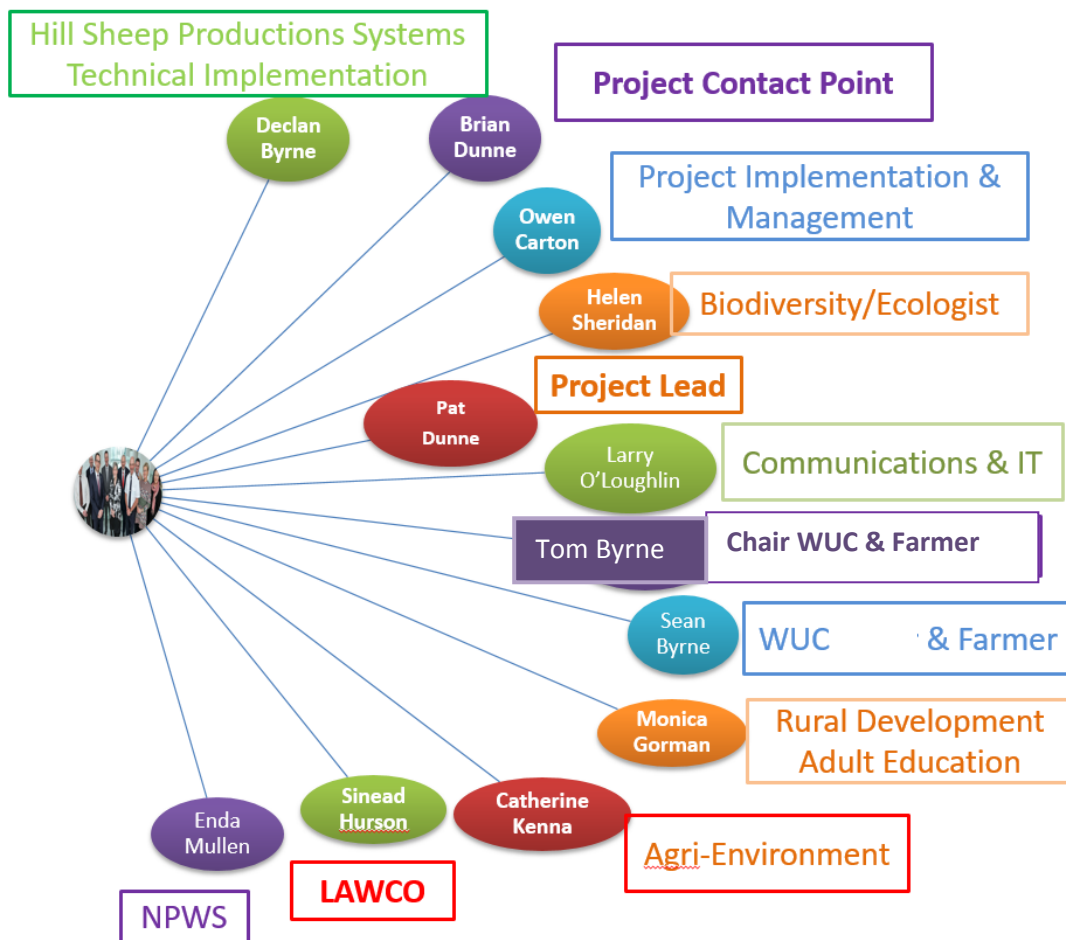


Figure 1. SUAS Project Operational Group

### Project Management Team

For the operation of the project, a Project Management Team of Brian Dunne, Pat Dunne, Project Administrator and Project Manager are in charge of running the project with direction and support from the operational group.

## **Project Start-up**

The project was initially developed by a vegetation committee , set up by WUC and representing various stakeholders including Teagasc. Owen Carton was contracted in to write up the final project application due to the time commitment required and the experience he had of technical writing, and he was funded by DAFM. The project received acceptance from the Dept. of Agriculture, Food & the Marine in December 2017. Due to the need to get farmers engaged and start the process of recruiting applicants before the 2018 lambing season, the project started with an interim project manager team consisting of Declan Byrne, Brian Dunne & Owen Carton. This interim arrangement stayed in place until a project manager was recruited.

## **Staff Recruitment**

### **Project Manager**

A job description was developed for the project manager role and the position advertised. Declan Byrne was appointed following a recruitment process. He is on secondment from Teagasc from August 2018 to the end of the project. It was felt that he was an ideal candidate as he was involved in the development of the project from the beginning and was able to hit the ground running following his appointment. He also already had a working relationship with the upland farmers in Wicklow and the various other stakeholders.

### **Administrator**

It was decided not to hire an administrator for the project as it would be difficult to have continuity of work, so this work is contracted out to WUC who invoice the project for the service. WUC also provides support and PR assistance to the project through its coordinator and communications officer.

### **Facilitator**

The SUAS project plans to have farmers form formal commonage groups for the management of commonages rather than dealing with them as individual farmers. As this is a new innovative approach, there were no guidelines for the formation of these groups. Members of the operation group devised a rough outline for the process and contracted in a qualified facilitator to work with the project manager to develop a template for how to form these groups.

Bobby Lambert, AshDan, was the chosen facilitator and he refined the planned process. He and the project manager then delivered a series of meetings with each commonage to form these commonage groups. A report on the process was completed at the end of the process with the findings being used to refine the process for taking in commonages in tranche 2.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SUAS-Facilitation-Report.pdf>

## **Ecologist**

It was felt by the operation group that there would be a lot of work in a short period of time in preparing the baseline surveys for the various participating sites in year 1 & year 5, but very little in the intervening years. Because of this, it was agreed to contract out the ecological work rather than hire in a part-time ecologist.

The project management team put out tenders for an ecologist to;

- Do up baseline surveys of the selected sites;
- Draw up management proposals;
- Meet the farmers on the hills to brief them on the ecology of the uplands and to develop management plans with them;
- Monitor the condition of the sites annually and propose any modifications to the plans required;
- Redo the baseline survey at the end of the project to assess changes in habitat quality and condition.

Faith Wilson was the ecologist chosen for phase 1 (and subsequently for the phase 2 sites) and completed the baseline surveys during the summer of 2018. She and the project manager met each group of farmers for a walk on their own upland area. The common response from the farmers was that this was the first time anybody told them why their land was designated as an SAC / SPA/ National Park, what was actually up there and how they should be managing it. It was also a chance for the farmers to tell the ecologist about what they actually do and the challenges they face.

Following consultation between the project manager, the ecologist and the farmers, management plans were agreed. These plans were then submitted to NPWS for screening and for the relevant permissions for certain works.

## **Phase 1**

### **Participant Recruitment**

As the project is introducing new concepts for farmers, it was decided to take participants into the project in 2 tranches, using the lessons learned in tranche 1 to improve the process where necessary for tranche 2. It was decided to take in 2 commonages and 1 non-commonage upland farmer in phase 1. The recruitment process for getting tranche 1 participants is summarised in Figure 2. below;



Figure 2. Tranche 1 recruitment process

The project management team screened the EOI's bases on forms being filled out correctly, accuracy of information provided, level of consultation with all shareholders and relevant issues known through local knowledge. A total of 20 Expression of Interest (EOIs) for commonages were received with 8 being called for a meeting with the project management team. A total of 7 EOI's for non-commonage upland areas were received, with two being called for a meeting with the project management team.

A score card for assessing the suitability of applicants was prepared in advance of the selection process and was used by the project management team in their selections. One non-commonage upland farmer and one commonage were selected initially, but then there were two more commonages with a similar score. Following a recommendation by the project management team, the operation group decided to take in both, so a total of three commonages were taken into the project in the first tranche.

Selected participants;

**Commonage:** Granamore, Ballybeg, Glassamullen

**Non-commonage:** Brian Mulligan, Powerscourt Paddocks





Figure 3. Selected sites for tranche 1 of SUAS Project

A full report on this process was completed and is available from the SUAS Project Team.

### Facilitation Process

Following selection to participate in the project, all farmers with interests on each of the 3 commonages were invited to a meeting in the Brockagh Resource Centre in Laragh, to commence the process of forming their commonage groups. A broad format for the process was developed by the operation group, but the facilitator, Bobby Lambert refined the plan and drew up an agenda for the meetings, to be delivered by himself and the project manager (known as the facilitation Team).





Photo 1. Farmers from Ballybeg Commonage



Photo 2. Farmers from Glassamullen Commonage



Photo 3. Farmers from Granamore Commonage

The Facilitation Team provided intensive support to each Commonage Group. All the meetings were conducted as planned with good attendance and participation by members. These included an initial communal meeting for all three commonage groups together, followed by 2 meetings for each of the three individual commonage groups and concluding with a second communal meeting.

These meetings contributed to the development of group capacity, notably with the dialogue and decision-making on the group constitutions. Each of the three Commonage Groups developed its own constitution including:

- Purpose of the group
- Membership details, including who is entitled to be a member and conditions of membership,
- Powers and objects of the group

- Operation of the group, including meeting procedures, election and functions of officers and voting structure.

The groups then agreed a process for the development of their commonage management plans, with support from the project ecologist and project manager.

## Commonage/Upland Area Management Plans

The ecologist, Faith Wilson, commenced the Baseline Surveys on the 4 selected sites in June 2018. The habitats were mapped to Level Three (Fossitt 2000) and according to their correspondence with Annex I habitats.

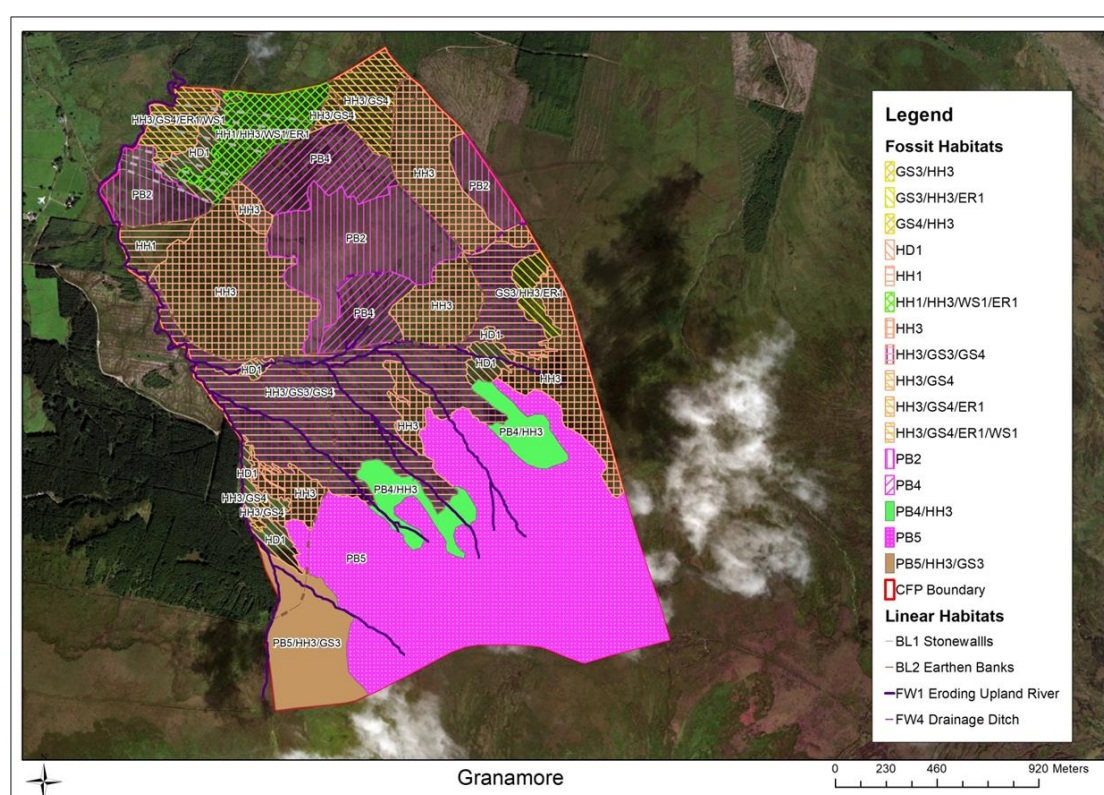


Figure 4. Sample of habitats mapped to Level Three (Fossitt, 2000) on Granamore commonage

A number of monitoring stops in each of the habitats present were then completed and the condition of the habitats was assessed. A map of the habitat condition assessment was then produced.

Using a simple map, dividing the commonage into management areas, was then drawn up and management recommendations for each area developed by the ecologist. The ecologist and the project manager then met with the farmers on their own commonage/upland area for a walk around relevant areas. This session proved very informative for both the ecologist and the farmers, with a repeated comment by the farmers that this was the first time that anybody had ever told the farmers why their lands

had received designations, what of importance was actually on the area and how they should be managed. It was also an opportunity for the ecologist to hear from the farmers what they are actually doing on the areas, the challenges they face and what they would like to do on the hills.

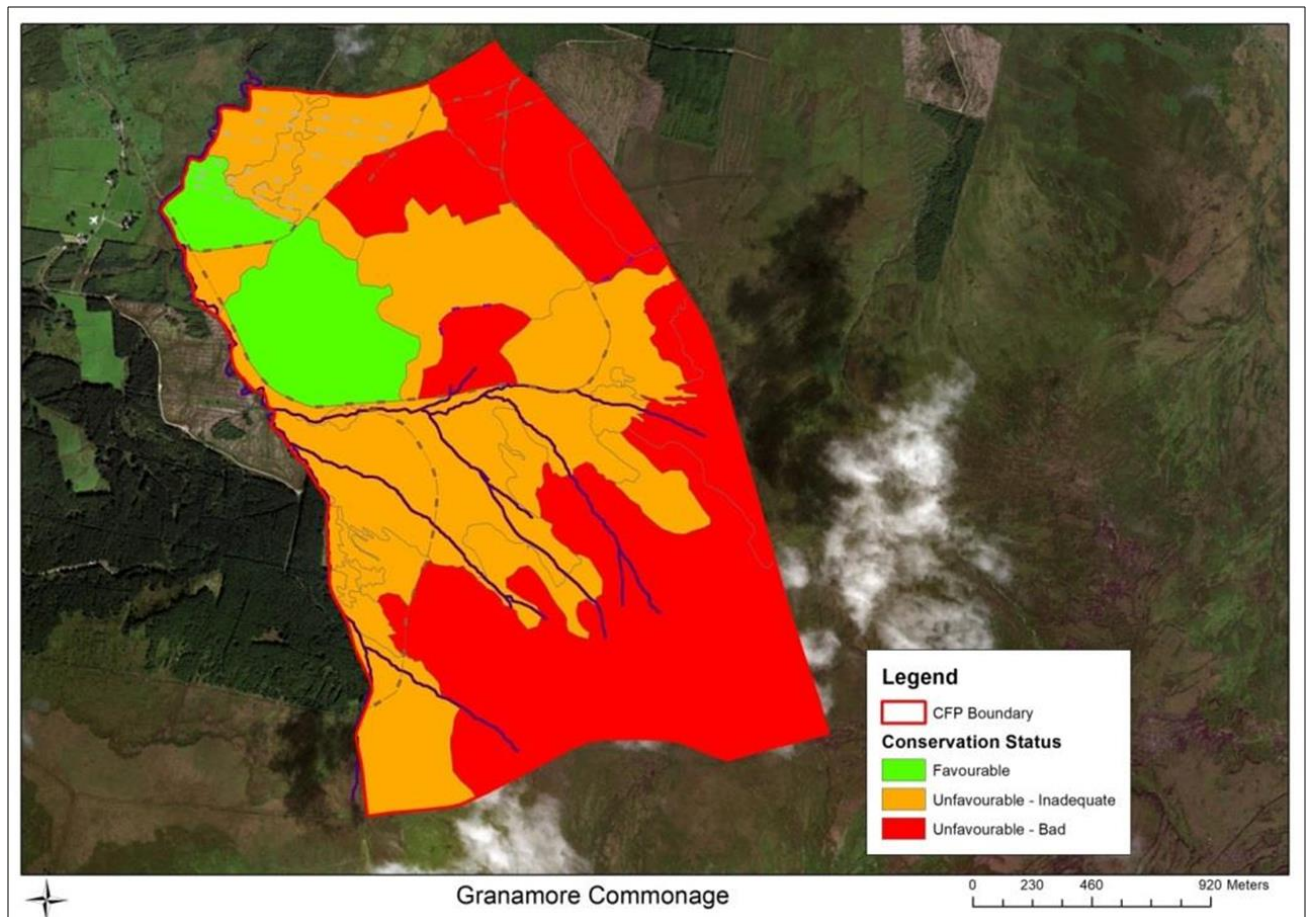


Figure 5. Sample Habitat Condition Assessment Map

Following the discussions, the baseline survey and management recommendations were presented to the farmers by the project manager. Following discussions, the management options that were deemed to be possible to deliver by the farmers and fell within the scope of the SUAS Project were agreed upon. A screening for appropriate assessment was then prepared by the ecologist and submitted to NPWS before any work was completed. In January 2019, the commonage groups and upland farmer signed off on their management plans so that work could proceed. A copy of the baseline reports for all the sites is available on the SUAS webpage <http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/suas-reports/>.



## **Phase 2**

### **Participant Recruitment**

A farmer meeting was held on 25th February (in the Brockagh Resource Centre, Laragh), to seek Expressions of Interest (EOI's), from Commonages and upland non-commonage farmers. There were media interviews and press releases in the local press and on social media to create awareness in the wider upland farming community of the EOI call. People who had given their contact details previously to the SUAS Project were contacted directly and local interest groups were invited to inform their members about the meeting.

Twelve EOIs were received for Commonages and four for non-commonage Upland Farms by the closing date, March 15th, 2019.

9 commonages and 2 non-commonage farmers were called for a meeting with an interview panel in order to select 3 commonages and one non-commonage area. An updated score card from phase 1 was used in the selection process, with higher priority given to certain criteria to ensure diversity in selected participants.

Following recommendations by the interview panel, based on the EOI's and interviews, the operation group decided to take in 3 commonages with a fourth being placed in reserve should funds become available for an extra site. Given the diversity of the 2 non-commonage farmers interviewed, their relatively small size and their representation of what habitats are in the Wicklow/Dublin Uplands, the operation group decided to accept both into the project.

Selected participants;

**Commonage:** Glassavullaun, Carrigeenduff, Corrasillagh, Slievemweel (reserve)

**Non-commonage:** Brian Mulligan, Powerscourt Paddocks, Cormac & Richard Ryan, Kilmashogue



Figure 6. Location of all SUAS Project participants

A full report on this process was completed and is available from the SUAS Project Team.

## Facilitation Process

Following selection, it was decided to involve Slievemweel in the facilitation process with the other commonages so that they could form their commonage group and develop their constitution alongside the other commonages. All the farmers with interests on each of the 4 commonages were invited to a meeting in the Brockagh Resource Centre in Laragh, to commence the process of forming their commonage groups.

The facilitation process was refined from the experiences of phase 1, with the result that there was one communal meeting of all groups at the start followed by two local meetings with each group. A draft constitution from phase 1 was used as a template for this phase and all groups developed and agreed their constitution without the need for a second communal meeting.



Photos 4-7. Members of the 4 phase 2 commonages working on developing their commonage groups.

A report of the facilitation process was completed by the facilitation team and based on the experiences of phase 1 & phase 2. A guide on how to form commonage groups and a template for a commonage group constitution were developed for use by any groups of farmers wishing to form a commonage group. These are available on the SUAS webpage <http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/suas-reports/> and will be updated over time as required.

### **Commonage/Upland Area Management Plans**

The ecologist, Faith Wilson, carried out the Baseline Surveys on the 4 selected sites in summer 2019. The habitats were mapped to Level Three (Fossit 2000) and according to their correspondence with Annex I habitats. The ecologist and the project manager then met with the farmers on their own commonage/upland area for a walk around relevant areas, before agreeing the final management plan. The same format as phase 1 was used for reporting and mapping. A screening for appropriate assessment was then prepared by the ecologist and submitted to NPWS in November, 2019 for discussion, before final submission to the Dept. of Agriculture, Food & the Marine.

## **Farmer Actions**

Three Commonages and one non-commonage upland farmer commenced their first year of farming within the SUAS Project in 2019. Below is a list of the actions/measures they carried out during the year;

### **Mulching Vegetation**

On all 4 sites, there were areas of tall vegetation that was in need of control. This was traditionally controlled by periodic burning, but the SUAS Project was keen to examine possible alternatives, particularly mulching. There was some mulching carried out on each site, some to create fire breaks while others were just for vegetation control. All cutting/mulching was carried out by an experienced contractor with experience of working on hills and with a suitable machine. There are obvious limitations with regard to where machinery can access but the recovery rates for the different types of vegetation and degree of mulching will be monitored over the project.



Photo 8. Heather cutting on Glassamullen Commonage

### **Controlled Burning**

Burning is the traditional method of controlling vegetation, particularly heather, on the uplands in Wicklow & Dublin. Unfortunately, due to restrictions on permissible burning dates, land designations and fear of insurance claims, a lot of the burning in this area in recent times has not been planned or controlled adequately. The SUAS Project aims to demonstrate what “controlled burning” actually is and how it can be successfully used as part of an overall habitat management plan.



The starting point was the Ecological Baseline Surveys for each site and the management plans developed for each site. Appropriate locations, vegetation type and condition and areas were identified on each site. Next, a “Burn Plan” was drawn up for each site, giving details of location, personnel involved, justification for burning and details of how it was planned to light and control the fire. Proper permissions were received from NPWS and the relevant organisations were all notified. Fire breaks were cut around each of the proposed burning areas to ensure fires could be controlled.

As none of the farmers had any experience of actual “Controlled Burning”, a training day was organised with Ciaran Nugent from the Forest Service, demonstrating proper PPE equipment and management tools, and detailing fire behaviour and how to plan and control fires. Unfortunately, due to the weather, it was not possible to carry out any burning on the day, but Ciaran did a walk through out on site for those present.



Photo 9. Ciaran Nugent, Forest Service, on controlled burning training day.

The SUAS project supplied each of the commonage groups with a set of equipment for the controlled burning (Powerscourt Paddocks & Glassnamullen are joining so they work together), as advised by Ciaran Nugent.



Photo 10. Set of equipment for Controlled Burning given to each commonage

The weather was only suitable on the 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup> & early in the day on 28<sup>th</sup> February and each of the 3 commonages successfully carried some controlled burning. This was a great learning experience for all involved and an example to the wider upland community of what controlled burning actually is. As none of the farmers had ever carried out controlled burning previously, Declan Byrne, who had received training on controlled burning a number of years ago, supervised the first day of burning on each site.



Photo 11. Controlled burning on Granamore commonages 26/02/2019



Photo 12. Controlled burning on Glassamullen commonage 27/02/2019



Photo 13. Controlled burning on Ballybeg commonage 28/02/2019



## Bracken Control

Bracken is a serious issue on a number of the sites, so again following recommendations from the ecologist, some bracken control was carried out using a variety of methods, including spraying by tractor, hand spraying, bruising and the introduction of cattle & horse grazing to trample.



Photos 14-17 Bracken control using a variety of control methods on Ballybeg commonage

## Roadway Repairs

There is an old roadway on Granamore commonage which has gone into disrepair in recent times, so the farmers wanted to repair it to make accessing the commonage easier for them. Following consultation with NPWS, they sent out their own machine to carry out some of the work and to demonstrate to the farmers how to actually do it. Water control is the biggest issue and once drains and culverts are cleaned up, that will allow the roadway to dry out before any further work is carried out. While the weather wasn't suitable to complete this work, now the farmers know exactly what to do and will complete it when time and weather permits.



Photo 18-19. Roadway repairs on Granamore

### **Shepherding**

This was an innovative measure devised to help farmers overcome the challenge of herding sheep while out on the hills. A payment was made available to the farmers for each time they went to herd their sheep and their neighbours and to control grazing on the hills. A phone app was used to certify that it took place and the data recorded will be monitored to see how this measure is working and if it needs modification.

### **Extended Grazing**

One of the biggest challenges for the Wicklow/Dublin uplands in general is to extend the times of the year when stock are actually grazing the uplands. There are usually too many sheep up in the July-September period but very little for the rest of the year. On dry heaths, it is important to have grazing in the Jan-Feb and the May-June period to encourage grazing of heather and scrubby plants, but unfortunately on most areas, very few sheep are on the hills at this time of year. A novel approach to encourage grazing at these times was the provision of sheep feeding buckets to the farmers by the SUAS project. The buckets are placed out on the hill and whoever has their sheep out will get the benefit of reduced feeding costs on their lowland and sheep in better condition coming off the hill. It is hoped that over time, this will encourage more grazing in these periods, and it will be monitored to see if they have any effect on grazing patterns.

## **Publicity**

The project manager and members of the SUAS Project Management Team organised and participated in a number of events and conferences during 2018 & 2019. A list of these events is given below;

### **2018**

- Hosted visits by farmers from, Mayo and Achill Island.
- Organised joint SUAS/Teagasc Hill Sheep Information Event in Blessington Mart
- Presented at Teagasc National Agri-Environment Conference
- Official launch of the project by Minister Andrew Doyle in November
- Gave talk to UCD Agricultural Science students
- Hosted visit from Tracy May, administrator for the Dartmoor Farming Futures project.

### **2019**

- Presented at meeting of the EIP Advisory Committee
- Hosted delegates from conference organised by the Standing Committee on Agriculture Research (SCAR) and their Strategic Working Group, Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation Systems (SWP-AKIS), held in Dublin in April
- Hosted Teagasc Hill Sheep In-service training session, with particular focus on upland habitat management
- Participated in a round table discussion at the Agri-Innovation Summit 2019, in Lisieux, France
- Hosted a visit as part of IFA Hill Sheep Conference being held in Wicklow
- Hosted a visit from CAFRE, as part of a Teagasc exchange
- Hosted a Teagasc discussion group from Waterford
- Attended launch of Droimeann Cattle Herd Book
- Attended National Ploughing Championships
- Participated in IUF Networking Workshop for Upland EIP's (Eip-Agri)

In addition to the above events, the project also received considerable coverage in local and national media (radio interviews on local station; articles in local & national newspapers and online articles).





Declan Byrne, Patrick McGurn, Catherine Keena & Fergal Monaghan Speaking at the 2018 Teagasc National Agri-Environment Conference



Attendance at joint SUAS/Teagasc Hill Sheep Information Event in Blessington Mart



Declan Byrne & Pat Dunne with Eileen Delaney at 2019 Poughing Championships



Minister Andrew Doyle with farmers and operation group members ahead of the SUAS Launch



Delegates from the SCAR-AKIS conferences at a SUAS briefing in the Brockagh Centre, Laragh



SUAS Project Manager, Declan Byrne presenting at the Irish Upland Forum Networking Workshop for Upland EIP's (Eip-Agri)



Some pens of sheep on display on Granamore commonage where SUAS hosted a session at the IFA Hill Conference,



Declan Byrne taking part in a round table discussion at the Agri-Innovation Summit 2019

## SUAS Project Demonstration Event

The SUAS project also held a Demonstration Event in Hollywood on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2019, followed by site visit and talks on one of the participating commonages. This was a very informative event and allowed the SUAS Project to share its learning and experiences with all stakeholders and other farmers who are trying to manage upland areas. The first part of the event involved the following presentations by members of the project operation group;

- Enda Mullen, National Parks & Wildlife Service gave a very informative talk on what is in our uplands and why they are so important.
- Monica Gorman, UCD School of Agriculture and Food Science gave a talk on the importance of collective farming & management of our uplands
- Declan Byrne, SUAS Project Manager gave an update on what the SUAS Project is actually doing on the participant sites

The event was attended by over 120 people who were then bussed out to Granamore commonage, one of the participant sites. Here there were practical talks given on general commonage management; roadway maintenance; gully & streamside vegetation; and vegetation management practices such as cutting and controlled burning.



The event commenced with presentation by the speakers in Hollywood Community Centre



Access to Granamore commonage by way of a bridge specially constructed for the day by some of the shareholders



Minister Andrew Doyle pictured with the members of the Granamore Commonage Group during the event



Ann Fitzpatrick NPWS, discussing roadway repairs





Despite the rain, there was great interest in looking at controlled burning areas and their recovery



Attendees making their way out on to the commonage



Denis Halpin, Chair of Granamore Commonage Group, talking about the practicalities of hill farming



There was interest from all quarters in the information being shared by the SUAS Project



An Roinn Cultúir,  
Oifig na nGaeilochas  
Department of Culture,  
Heritage and the Gaeltacht



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
Bliainín Móra  
Department of Agriculture,  
Food and the Marine



Waters  
& communities  
Healthy Waters, Healthy People



Teagasc  
Agriculture and Food Research Centre

SUAS Project, Parish Hall  
Main Street Roundwood, Co Wicklow  
Email: [declan.suas@wicklowuplands.ie](mailto:declan.suas@wicklowuplands.ie)  
[www.wicklowuplands.ie/suasproject/](http://www.wicklowuplands.ie/suasproject/) SUAS Project, Parish Hall