

# Pearl Mussel Project News

*Farming for nature in freshwater pearl mussel catchments*



Issue no.4 September 2021



*Photo: Michael Chapman, PMP Assistant Catchment Officer*

## Project Update

The vast majority of our 470 farmers attended farmer training during summer 2021.

2,700 scorecards were submitted by farm advisors during the summer.

**PMP team are now busy working on verifying scores to get farmer payments issued as soon as possible.**

We are pleased to report that the scheme is expanding in the north-west thanks to the Wild Atlantic Nature EU Life IP project adopting our approach (*further details inside*).



*Photos from our advisor training held over the summer*



## Assistant Catchment Officer

Michael Chapman started working with the Pearl Mussel Project during May 2021. We asked Michael to describe his experience in his new role.



Michael delivering farmer training in Blackwater catchment.

Hello to you all,

I come from a small rural village in County Tipperary. I was very fortunate growing up where I did. Little did I know growing up around this wealth of biodiversity, that one day I would be studying it as a career!

I graduated as a Wildlife Biologist from the Munster Technological University (formally Institute of Technology Tralee) in 2020, where I spent 4 great years studying and gaining valuable practical experience. After graduating I worked with an environmental consultancy where I was mainly involved in the area of water quality.

I started my new role as an Assistant Catchment Officer in May 2021 in the southwest catchments of Kerry and West Cork. Over the Summer months I was very busy at various tasks. I spent 4 weeks delivering training courses to advisors and farmers. It was great to meet the farmers from each catchment and the training was well received and enjoyed by all!

I got to spend the bulk of my summer visiting farms in these picturesque catchments. Surveying in these rugged landscapes was sometimes challenging, but I got to experience some incredible places. I have also been working away in the office organising time schedules, data analysis, app development, GIS (digital mapping), as well as a host of other duties.

My time so far on the project has been a great experience and I'm looking forward to seeing what the future holds!

Wishing you all continued health,

*MICHAEL FROM THE PMP TEAM.*



WILD ATLANTIC  
NATURE LIFE

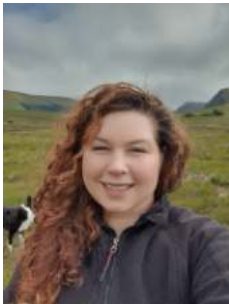
Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP is a €20M EU-funded project that works with the partnership of 10 government /semi state departments over a nine-year period running to 2029. Its aim is to assist in improving the status of our Natura 2000 network of important habitats and species, including the freshwater pearl mussel. The project has a broad scope that includes landuse policy, community engagement, ecological and climate research, forestry and agriculture.

One of the aims of the project is to build on the success of the Pearl Mussel Project and other programmes and apply the Results-based Agri-environment Payment Scheme (RBPS) approach to deliver benefits for protected habitats throughout Ireland, with a particular focus on blanket bog. The project started in 2021 and currently has 175 participant farmers in the Owenduff/Nephin SAC, Co. Mayo. It is hoped to increase the number of farmers to up to 800 in 2022 in the northwest with the objective of providing a good distribution of farmers and agricultural advisors with experience in how RBPS work. This will help build capacity for the transition to these schemes in the Common Agriculture Policy from 2023 across much of the west of Ireland.

Wild Atlantic Nature LIFE IP uses a model developed in the Pearl Mussel Project EIP. This model, designed with the farmers and advisors of the top 8 freshwater pearl mussel catchments in Ireland, provides an excellent template for the conservation of biodiversity, provision of clean water and improved carbon sequestering and potential to assist in the reduction of climate impacts. We look forward to working with the Pearl Mussel Project team of over the coming years.



# Farmers' local knowledge on the Pearl Mussel Project and farmland conservation



The ongoing study by Verena Berard, PhD student and recipient of the Connacht Ulster Alliance (CUA) scholarship at IT Sligo and GMIT, provides a comparative analysis of the 'top-down' agri-environmental scheme, known as GLAS and the 'bottom-up' approach to results-based agri-environmental schemes.

## BACKGROUND TO STUDY

The traditional model of action-oriented and top-down agri-environmental payments subsidises farmers to undertake environmentally friendly farming practices. In Ireland an example of this is GLAS, which is linked to objectives of biodiversity, water quality and climate change. The effectiveness of these action-oriented schemes in delivering environmental benefits has recently been questioned. Results-based agri-environmental schemes, such as the Pearl Mussel Project (PMP), have been proposed as a suitable alternative, which incentivise farmers to achieve clearly defined and measurable environmental results. To date, very little research has addressed how farmers perceive these schemes. A question that I am researching (in part through a series of interviews undertaken with Pearl Mussel Project farmers) is whether results-based schemes can bring about more efficient collaboration between farmers, experts, scientists, and other stakeholders. This increased cooperation and 'knowledge exchange' among multiple stakeholders in turn can promote mutual understanding between farmers and scientists, which has the potential to result in more effective farmland and biodiversity conservation.

## THE FARMERS VIEW OF PMP

Some preliminary findings of this study indicate that the PMP has been well received by Connemara farmers, who like to participate in farming practices that preserve high-level water quality, ensuring the conservation of the freshwater pearl mussel.

The majority of the farmers in this study agreed that the PMP has given them an incentive to improve nature on the farm. At the same time, farmers in this study have also indicated how they recognise a clear distinction between top-down implementation of GLAS and the results-based PMP, as one farmer commented: "having the knowledge of the local area is very important and people need to respect that kind of knowledge... (while, in the past) some of the policy makers, for example those who have come up with GLAS, have not acknowledged farmers' knowledge... But the Pearl Mussel Project is different, good and fair." This indicates how farmers value their own knowledge and prefer schemes in



which they have the flexibility to make use of their own knowledge and skills.

A typical aspect of results-based schemes are the score cards, which mainly determine farmers' payment, as the field score/s reflect the overall quality of the farmland habitat, therefore positively reflecting on water quality. Score cards are certainly a novel concept to farmers, and findings indicate that it takes time to get used to them, as one of the farmers mentioned:

"The score cards are clear enough, but it takes a bit of time to explain them." While another farmer criticised that: "an issue with the score cards is that the images of the indicator species were all taken on a perfectly sunny summer's day. But, when you are on the land on a rainy day and the flower has maybe not even bloomed yet, it is much more difficult to identify them. So, that is why it takes you longer to get used to them and you have to still use a lot of your own knowledge too."

Therefore, the role of the Pearl Mussel Project farm advisor is crucial in working together closely with farmers, to help them to overcome such challenges. The majority of farmers in this study have indicated that they feel positive about this type of knowledge exchange and collaboration with experts and scientists, as one farmer commented: "the (scientists/ experts) are finally listening to the people on the ground... and in all of my life that is the first time this has happened."

In addition, the study also revealed that some farmers felt positively towards supporting actions, such as drain blocking, clearance of invasive species, improving fencing and water/feeding troughs. For example, one farmer mentioned: "(In the PMP) the choice is with the farmer, even with blocking the drains in the bog, as the farmer can decide himself if he wants to do that or not. I find that giving farmers the choice is very important." This is one of the reasons why farmers who have an interest in low-intensity and environmentally friendly farming practices, approve of this scheme. For example, one Connemara farmer recorded "the Pearl Mussel Project... offers a more inclusive and engaging environment... (which) helps to motivate farmers to protect nature."

## EFFECTIVENESS OF PMP

Currently it is difficult to conclusively evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Pearl Mussel Project in resulting in better environmental protection. However, some preliminary findings from this research indicate a hopeful trajectory for the future of this scheme. However, successful implementation of results-based payment programmes have been trialled and tested elsewhere in Ireland for nearly 20 years (e.g. Burren Programme). A clear advantage of these schemes is the adaptive, flexible, targeted and potentially more collaborative approach they follow. This new narrative around agri-environmental policy implementation enables the opportunity for farmers to apply their own local knowledge and skills in an innovative manner, ensuring more effective farmland and biodiversity conservation.

## Pearl Mussel Advisor Profile and Management Advice

Joanne Hamilton, who works with many of our farmers in Counties Kerry & Cork, is the Pearl Mussel Advisor featured in this edition.

There have been a lot of changes in the farming landscape over the last 25 years since I have been involved in farming schemes; farmers and planners alike have had to adapt to shifts in policies and public demands and expectations.

I began working in agriculture in 1996, with the introduction of the REPS scheme there was plenty of work for all, and it was a busy and exciting time for planners and farmers alike. The scheme was widely welcomed by planners, farmers and the public, indeed most farmers and planners reminisce about the great days of the REPS era.

I came to work in Kerry after graduating from Aberdeen University in 1995 with a Masters in Soil Science, having obtained my initial degree in Science in Maynooth University, specialising in Plant Biology.

I work mostly in the Cork and Kerry regions now with Marie McCarthy, Hamilton & McCarthy Ltd., we



Joanne Hamilton, PMP  
approved farm advisor

have worked in schemes with farmers including BPS, REPS, AEOS, TAMS, Nutrient Management and lately the REAP scheme, The Pearl Mussel Programme and the Hen Harrier Programme.

The farming community as well as planners have had to adapt quickly over the years, starting out farmers could claim grants for improving ground, including reclamation and drainage works, now we have come full circle and farmers are getting paid to retain habitats for biodiversity and promote habitat value to protect water quality.

### MANAGEMENT ADVICE

With the onset of Autumn, it is important to remember soil conservation, we want to keep the soil in the fields and minimise the risk of run-off of soil and indeed nutrients from slurry as we approach the cut off date for application of slurry and organic waste.

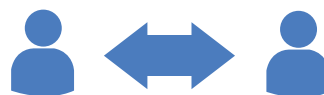
Ensure animals are housed or moved to drier ground if there is danger of poaching damage again leading to bare ground and run-off. If we can conserve our soil and respect our waterways on our own farms we can protect these important resources into the future. Now as we approach the winter is a good time to manage our hedgerows, tidying and cutting where necessary and planting any gaps with native species.

## Keep in touch!

Don't forget to check our project website ([www.pearlmusselproject.ie](http://www.pearlmusselproject.ie)) for news and updates. We also have active Facebook (@pearlmusselproject) and Twitter (@pearl\_mussel) accounts where we post regular updates, so follow us there if you don't already.

On our website you will also find a range of videos that we have created which may be of interest to you or someone you know.

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The Pearl Mussel Project is an EIP (European Innovation Partnership) Locally Led Scheme. The Project is funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

