



Rural Development Division
Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine
Agriculture House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

16th June 2014

Our Ref: SCP130102.4

Re: Draft Rural Development Programme 2014- 2020 and Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report

Dear Sir/ Madam

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) acknowledges your correspondence, received 23rd May 2014, in relation to the Draft Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (RDP) and associated SEA Environmental Report (ER). The EPA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the SEA Environmental Report. Our submission focuses primarily on the integration of environmental considerations into the RDP and on significant aspects in relation to the SEA ER.

We also refer you to our previous submission on the Draft Consultation Paper on the 19th February 2014 and our SEA scoping submission dated the 1st May 2014, both attached, which should be taken into account in finalising the RDP. In addition, previous climate change related observations on the Draft Consultation Paper are attached. These previous submissions should be considered to be part of this submission.

The EPA recognises and reiterates the important role the RDP will have in the implementation of the European Commission's policy framework for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). In this context, the EPA notes the potential contribution the RDP will make to the overall objectives of ensuring the on-going competitiveness of the agriculture sector, the sustainable management of natural resources and climate action and the balanced territorial development of rural areas.

In addition, the EPA recognises the important part that agriculture and the rural community have in Ireland's economic recovery. This role will, however, be dependent on Ireland achieving and maintaining a good quality environment. The overall objective of the environmental assessment of the RDP should be to provide for a high level of protection of the environment and to promote environmentally sustainable development in rural areas. This will be achieved by fully integrating environmental considerations in the implementation of the RDP across the relevant aspects of the rural environment.

While the linkages between the RDP and Food Harvest 2020 are described, consideration should be given to including a stronger commitment to ensuring consistency with other high level strategic plans. These include the River Basin Management Plans (and associated Programme of Measures), Draft National Peatlands Strategy, Draft National Forestry Programme (under preparation), Draft Forestry Policy Review, National Climate Change Adaptation Framework, Green Paper on Energy Policy and the *Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Bill 2013*.

Rural Development Programme

In the 'Introductory Note' of the RDP, it is stated that the material in the document "represents a draft of particular chapters" of the RDP. This should be further clarified in the context of the implications on the SEA and Appropriate Assessment. A description of any additional chapters for inclusion in the

final RPD should also be provided. The relevant aspects of the completed RPD should be included and assessed within the SEA and AA respectively prior to finalisation of the RPD. Of particular interest, from an SEA perspective is the Indicator Plan and Evaluation Plan and associated performance indicators to be applied in the monitoring and evaluation of the RPD. This aspect should also be linked with the SEA ER and the related SEA monitoring proposals.

The RDP measures, including *Agri-Environment and Climate Measures*, *Areas of Natural Constraint*, *On Farm Capital Investments*, *Knowledge Transfer* and *Targeted Support* represent significant opportunities to provide for a high level of environmental protection while achieving the aims of the RDP.

The allocation of in the order of 40% of the proposed RDP funding to the green –Low Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS/ GLAS +) and almost a further 35% to Areas of Natural Constraints signals a significant commitment to the RDP delivering a range of positive environmental outcomes. These are of particular relevance in the context of the protection of water quality and biodiversity and minimising the contribution of agriculture to climate change.

The change in focus from livestock numbers and outputs to quality of agricultural output is welcome and has the potential to be a significant driver for a more environmentally sustainable agricultural sector in the future. The implementation of robust monitoring of the environmental performance of these key commitments to environmental protection reflected in the plan will be important in determining the overall success of the measures. There would be merits in the context of both the RDP and the SEA in defining what environmentally sustainable farming systems/ production means.

It should be ensured that the implementation of the RDP does not conflict with the overall objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). In this regard, in particular, pristine high status waters need to be afforded adequate protection. The RDP should consider the inclusion of specific measures to ensure pristine high status water bodies are not in any way compromised due to agriculture developments. To this effect, it is noted and welcomed that the GLAS and GLAS + Schemes make specific reference to High Status Water Area, Vulnerable Water Area and Protection of water courses (not in High Status or Vulnerable Areas). There would be merit in aligning the terminology being used with that of the WFD.

Consideration will also need to be given to the application of appropriate exclusions along watercourses based on predefined criteria to ensure the on-going protection of water quality. These should be identified in consultation with the DECLG, DAHG -NPWS, DECNR- IFI, EPA and key relevant stakeholders. There would also be merit in considering within GLAS and GLAS+ the inclusion of a requirement for actions related to wider farm waste management, water conservation and energy conservation.

In relation to *Community based Rural Development*, there may be merit in further expanding on the potential ecosystem services which may be considered. In addition, there would also be merit in considering options such as agri-tourism and eco-tourism in association with key relevant stakeholders in the context of supporting the rural economy and promoting local environmental protection.

There would be merit in promoting/supporting the methodologies employed in the Burren LIFE Farming for Conservation Programme, IRD Duhallow LIFE Programme and the most recently established AranLIFE Project. The inclusion of mechanisms for the provision of resources to programmes such as the above should be considered, as options to promote best practice at community and farm level in particular with a view to supporting rural communities and protecting environmental sensitivities.

In terms of potential environmental threats to biodiversity, reference should be made to relevant key Plans/Programmes responsible for the protection and management of designated habitats and species, as relevant and appropriate to the RDP. In this regard, your attention is brought in particular to the Draft Freshwater Pearl Mussel Sub Basin Management Plans, Pollution Reduction Programmes for Shellfish Waters, River Basin Management Plans and associated Programme of Measures, Forestry Management Plans, National Peatlands Strategy, Raised Bogs SAC Management Plans and other relevant Natura 2000 Management Plans.

In relation to *Chapter 3 – Measure Descriptions*, the Agency's previous submission, attached, focuses on the specific measures and should be taken into account in finalising the RDP. The relevant information on potential mitigation measures included in the measure descriptions in the RDP should also be reflected in the SEA ER.

The inclusion of *Annex 3 – National Legislation and relevance to measures under this Programme* is noted. Consideration should be given to including an additional Annex summarising the key relevant strategic Plans/Programmes/Policies/Strategies which may be influenced or have potential to influence the RDP.

Specific comments and observations in relation to the SEA Environmental Report are set out in Appendix 1.

Should you have any queries or require further information in relation to the above please contact Tadhg O'Mahony at t.omahony@epa.ie. Please provide an acknowledgement of receipt of this submission to sea@epa.ie.

Yours Sincerely

p.p.



Matt Crowe
Director
Office of Environmental Assessment
Environmental Protection Agency
PO Box 3000
Johnstown Castle Estate
County Wexford

Appendix 1 – Specific Comments on SEA Environmental Report

A number of aspects of the SEA Environmental Report (ER) should be reviewed and updated as appropriate to fully reflect the requirements of the SEA Directive and national SEA Regulations.

These include the following:

- *Non-Technical Summary*- the Non-Technical Summary should be updated to reflect the relevant information required by the SEA Directive and Regulations and, where relevant, the information highlighted below.
- *Information on Consultation Feedback*: the ER should include information on how consultation comments were taken into account; what changes have been made in response to the SEA process; and difficulties encountered in compiling the required information etc. (SEA Directive Annex 1h).
- *Scoping*: an outline should be provided of the SEA scoping process. Consideration should be given to providing a more detailed summary of the key comments made by the SEA Statutory Authorities (including trans-boundary consultation bodies) for clarity.
- *Baseline / assessment of Environmental Baseline*: While it is noted that all environmental criteria have been scoped in to the SEA, Section 2 -Environmental Setting should be reviewed and updated to reflect a more comprehensive description of the current environment. Environmental aspects which should be added include the following environmental topics: groundwater resources, landscape, geology, material assets (drinking water / wastewater / waste) and cultural heritage.
- The Baseline description relies to a large degree on the information included in Ireland's Environment. Where, updated information and /or reports are available on individual topics, these should be reflected, where relevant and appropriate, in the SEA ER.
- The SEA ER and the RDP would benefit significantly from the inclusion of relevant suitably scaled mapping to depict specific aspects of the Baseline environment and associated environmental sensitivities.
- Consideration should be given to including a series of environmental protection objectives, which would relate to the assessment of the likely significant effects on the relevant aspects of the environment.
- The assessment should also take into account the potential for cumulative/ in-combination effects in the context of both the SEA and Habitats Directive (Appropriate Assessment), and other key plans/strategies. In particular, the potential for conflict with the objectives of the WFD should be assessed. The implications Food Harvest 2020 and climate change should also be considered.
- *SEA findings are not clearly influencing the plan*: There is a lack of clarity on how the SEA process has informed the preparation of the RDP. The role of the SEA in the development of the RDP should be clearly documented in both the RDP and the SEA ER. The RDP should also reflect the findings and recommendations of the AA in the ER and the RDP.
- *Alternatives*: The extent of the assessment of alternatives should be reviewed and updated to reflect a more robust approach to alternative appraisal. *Chapter 2 – Description of the Strategy* of

the RDP describes the investment strategy associated with implementing the measures associated with the thematic needs assessment. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to developing alternatives in the context of the allocation of funding associated with the investment strategy which supports the various ‘Needs assessment priorities’.

- **Mitigation Measures:** It is noted that the SEA ER – *Chapter 4 – Environmental Assessment* has made determinations relating to each particular measures, largely relating to the lack of a need for mitigation measures. This seems to conflict with the inclusion of “*Mitigating Actions*” described in the RDP for particular measures. The SEA ER, should in particular, take account of and include these “*Mitigating Actions*” for the various measures described. Appropriate mitigations measures should be identified to address any specific significant effects identified in the assessment. These measures should, where relevant and appropriate, be reflected in specific commitments in the RDP.
- **Monitoring and Reporting:** A detailed programme to monitor the significant effects of implementing the proposed new annual planning targets should be established in partnership with other relevant stakeholders. To facilitate monitoring, the specific Measures/Actions should be assigned specific Targets and Indicators to facilitate monitoring, review and reporting on the environmental performance of implementation of the specific Measures/Actions. Information should also be provided on the sources of information to be used, the frequency of monitoring and the bodies responsible for carrying out the monitoring should be described. While it is noted reference is made to various monitoring programmes, information should also be provided on the specific aspects the monitoring programme will cover.

The aspects raised above should be reviewed and, where relevant and appropriate, the SEA ER updated to reflect the points raised. The SEA, and where relevant, the AA, should be reviewed, to reflect the full complement of chapters of the RDP when they become available.