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Association of Farm Contractors in Ireland

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8<sup>th</sup> January 2015

Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht,  
Review of Section 40  
7 Ely Place,  
Dublin 2.

To: [nature.conservation@ahg.gov.ie](mailto:nature.conservation@ahg.gov.ie)

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Association of Farm Contractors in Ireland (FCI), the national association representing farm contractors in Ireland, is pleased to send you its submission for changes to sections of Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2012. FCI has carefully read, analysed and discussed the public consultation review document with the aim of preserving Ireland's biodiversity (see Note 1).

The FCI requests that the current legislation be changed to allow for the cutting of roadside hedges for public safety reasons, outside of the current closed period. We also request that current closed periods for the operation of hedgecutters on farms be extended by two weeks at spring and autumn, in order to support better farming practices.

This request to allow the cutting of hedges on public roadsides should not solely apply to dangerous road bends; it should also apply to all sections of public roads. We are aware that current planning permission requirements state that there must be road visibility from the entrance of a new residence extending to 180 metres on either side of the proposed entrance. We believe that this safe level of road visibility must be maintained during the summer season by hedgecutting machines in the skilled hands of farm contractors.

This issue is also a significant concern for all road using citizens in rural areas. Developing safe and sustainable hedge management strategies will provide for the creation of safer public roads. It is also essential for the preservation of tractor safety systems, such as the obligatory flashing amber lights that are faced with the daily breakage challenges provided by the obstacles that take the form of uncontrolled roadside hedges.



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We are seeking an extension to the current closed periods for the operation of hedgecutters on farms during the springtime period until March 17, which is two weeks short of the original April 1 closed period. We are also seeking an extension to the autumn closed period, bringing it back from September 1 to August 17.

The reason for the springtime extension is to take account of changes in weather conditions and farming practices that have impacted on the ability of our farm contractor members to carry out this important work for our farmer customers. Increasing rainfall as a result of climate change has resulted in ground conditions during the months of December, January and February that are typically waterlogged and cannot be travelled upon by modern farm machinery without causing significant soil structural damage.

In other climate areas of Europe prolonged periods of frost, frozen ground conditions provide ideal stability and floatation characteristics to operate hedgecutting machines. Climate change has resulted in shorter windows of such weather being available to farm contractors in Ireland (see Note 2).

We have experienced prolonged periods of heavy rainfall that render field conditions impossible to work in. We urge that the review of the Wildlife Acts takes the impact of these changed climate conditions into consideration and allows for some flexibility in line with current and predicted weather changes.

The extension to the autumn closed period to the middle of August is requested as many contractors and farmers cannot maintain their hedges after September 1 as crops are such as winter barley and oilseed rape will already have been planted as part of good farming practice before the end of August.

Moreover, FCI as the sole democratic organisation representing farm contractors in Ireland, now calls upon the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht to ensure that the association is systematically consulted in the coming phases of the review of the Wildlife Acts. FCI will make a positive contribution towards the development of new and sustainable strategies that combine the preservation of the environment with enhanced road safety measures for a modern Irish rural society. We want to share in our responsibility for the conservation of biodiversity and safety in Irish hedgerows.

We look forward to meeting with you to discuss this submission in greater detail.

Yours sincerely,



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John Sheehy,  
National Chairman FCI



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# Summary of Farm Contractors Ireland Submission

## 1. Allow roadside hedgecutting for safety reasons

- Allow cutting of all roadside hedges for road safety reasons outside of the current closed period

<b>Reasons</b>	Road safety for all public road users Safety of machinery/tractors and attachments,, etc
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### Other issues

#### Truck & bus traffic

Trucks use rural roads for the delivery of goods and for the collection of farm produce. The lack of hedge maintenance of roadside hedges impacts on the safety of trucks, as side mirrors are regularly damaged, low overhead branches are broken and subsequently fall on following vehicles. In these conditions, many larger vehicles, trucks and tractors, are involved in minor accidents, some of these minor accidents go unreported. Vehicle repairs in these situations are an ongoing cost.



Hedgecutting on roadsides will give an extra 1 metre in road visibility from our experience as hedgecutting machine operators.



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## Walkers and runners

As the summer months approach, many people including a growing number of tourists are encouraged to take to walk and jog on our rural roads for pleasure, health and exercise reasons. Their safety is compromised due to overgrown hedgerows. The lack of a safe roadside space means that they are constant danger and are an additional hazard to road vehicle users.



## Cow Parsley

The Cow Parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) which flowers from April to June is a major problem on Irish hedgerows. It thrives in shady places, such as grassy banks and hedgerows, and dislikes wet, boggy ground. It is quite hardy, and can survive a lot of traffic fumes as well as agricultural sprays. The abundant growth of Cow Parsley has a huge impact on road visibility and road user safety in summer months. This plant can be controlled in a sustainable way by the effective use of hedgcutting machinery from the month of April onwards.





## 2. Extending the spring closed hedgcutting dates to March 17

- Extend the spring closed hedgcutting dates on farms to March 17

**Reasons**      Less soil structural and field damage  
Damage delays grass growth and makes fields unsafe  
More efficient work and safer practices



Hedgerows are a valuable resource on farms, providing shelter for livestock and a habitat for a wide range of wildlife. Approximately 450,000ha or 6.4% of the country is covered by hedgerows, individual trees and small woodland patches and scrub, contributing hugely to wildlife in the countryside (*Teagasc*). Under cross compliance for the Single Farm Payment (SFP), hedgerows must be maintained and not allowed to become invasive by timely and sustainable use of hedgcutting machinery in the hands of skilful farm contractor operators.

## 3. Bring forward the autumn closed hedgcutting dates to August 17

- Bring forward the autumn closed hedgcutting dates on farms to August 17

**Reasons**      New cropping strategies for winter barley & oilseed rape  
Hedges cut before crops are sown as not possible after sowing without incurring significant crop damage  
More efficient and safer work practices  
Utility providers such as ESB Networks and Eircom are allowed to carry out significant hedge and tree cutting activities in the closed season for safety reasons and this should be extended to road safety issues on rural roads.



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Note 1

For its relatively small size Ireland has a rich biological diversity. Biodiversity has an intrinsic value and it is essential to the economic and social fabric of Ireland. Over 90% of 1000 people surveyed in 2013 stated that halting biodiversity loss was a moral obligation, and that our well-being and quality of life is based on nature and biodiversity. (5TH NATIONAL REPORT TO THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY October 2014).

Note 2

Climate change is reported as a pressure on 10% of habitats protected under the EU Habitats Directive, and there is evidence that it is already negatively impacting coastal habitats. Predictions indicate that degraded upland habitats, in particular, will become less resilient to the impacts of climate change in the immediate future. These predictions relate mainly to drier summers and higher levels of more intense rainfall which are likely to result in bog bursts and landslides which may indirectly impact other habitats such as lakes. A recent study suggests that that the current protected area network may not adequately conserve many montane species. (5TH NATIONAL REPORT TO THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY October 2014).



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