

NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDLIFE PILOT FARM PLAN SCHEME FOR CORNCRAKE SPAs IN DONEGAL AND MAYO

Application Form to be completed and submitted to:

Julie Kearney, NPWS, Ballinafad, near Boyle, Co. Roscommon

Tel. **071 9666700**; email julie.kearney@environ.ie

Summary

The NPWS Corncrake Farm Plan Scheme (CFPS) is to be piloted in the following Special Protection Areas (SPAs)

- Malin Head SPA (no. 4146)
- Fanad Head SPA (no. 4148)
- Falcaragh to Meenlaragh SPA (no. 4149)
- Mullet Peninsula SPA (no. 4227)

The primary aim of the CFPS is to sign up farmers to a five year plan of Early and Late Cover (ELC) creation, its maintenance and delayed mowing of adjacent meadows. Key to this 5-year CFPS is that the farmer would delay mowing only until the 15th of July on nominated plots. However if a calling male is recorded in or within 250m of these lands then the farmer is obliged to delay mowing until the 20th of August or the 1st of September and to mow in a Corncrake Friendly Manner (CFM) i.e. slow and centre out.

Unlike the long established Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS) delayed mowing of nominated fields with Corncrakes is mandatory if participating in CFPS. The 5-year CFPS also allows the farmer to plan to farm in a manner that the occurrence of Corncrake on his land will not seriously disrupt his/her year to year practices.

Suitable cover but in particular early cover is an essential requirement, currently limiting corncrake populations on mainland sites in Donegal and Mayo. Effective Early and Late Cover (ELC) creation may take 2-3 years to establish, so requires a 5-year period for effective delivery. ELC is needed from first arrival in late April. Meadows dominated by soft grasses tend to lodge overwinter and become impenetrable, which is why early cover prescriptions focus on rigid or stiff-stemmed but sparsely-growing species like cow parsley, iris and nettles.

If opting to apply to join CFPS, the farmer will nominate fields/areas within the designated SPA where he must take up measure 1 and/or 2 in combination with measure 3 and/or 4. The farmer must also allow for access by NPWS or their agents to carry out predator control if required.

Measure 1 to create and maintain a suitable area of Early and Late Cover Plots

Measure 2 to maintain and enhance existing areas as ELC

Measure 3 to establish a Corncrake friendly mown grassland management regime

Measure 4 to establish a Corncrake friendly grazed grassland management regime

Please note on entry into the Corncrake Farm Plan Scheme the farmer may be required to undertake management measures on his non-nominated lands, which are contiguous to those areas nominated in the particular plan:

1. 'Centre out' mowing of meadow/silage fields contiguous with the nominated fields but outside of the SPA is required if a calling male corncrake is recorded within 250 m of the field in question.

2. For those fields within the SPA, contiguous with the fields nominated in the FPS and is within 250m of a recorded calling Corncrake, entry into the Corncrake Grant Scheme (CGS) may be a requirement – this may involve delayed harvesting of the crop and mowing in a ‘centre out’ manner

Payment Rates under the CFPS

Measure 1

Spread over the five year plan payment will be available to successfully create an ELC plot(s) at the following rates:

- €1.75 per m² for the first 0.1 ha
- €1.50 per m² is payable for areas greater than 0.1 ha (noting that the maximum area payable under this Measure is 0.5ha)

Measure 2

A per hectare rate is payable annually for the maintenance and enhancement of existing ELC plots - provided the required cover is present throughout the breeding season of each year (i.e. Late April to Late September). The rates are as follows:

Up to 0.1 ha	@ €380 per ha
0.11 – 0.25 ha.	@ €440 per ha
Greater than 0.26 ha	@ €220 per ha

Measure 3

A per hectare rate is payable annually for the delayed mowing of the nominated fields

- July 15th meadow mowing: €275 per hectare
- August 20th meadow mowing: €450 per hectare
- September 1st meadow mowing: €510 per hectare

Measure 4

A per hectare rate is payable annually for the delayed grazing of the nominated fields

- post July 15th pasture grazing: €275 per hectare
- post August 20th pasture grazing: €450 per hectare

Background

Corncrakes once bred throughout Ireland but with intensification in farming practices their numbers and distribution declined. Corncrakes are now found only in County Donegal and parts of West Connaught, particularly the western seaboard of counties Mayo and Galway and on the Shannon Callows.

In recent years, farmers in these areas have entered into the Corncrake Grant Scheme and/or other small-scale one-off payments for habitat management. Last year some landowners opted to enter parcels of land into conacre agreements with NPWS who in turn managed the land primarily for Corncrake conservation. These measures have been successful in preventing the population from becoming extinct and have led to recovery in some areas. Five-year management agreements have been established in the Shannon Callows SPA through REPS SM1 and the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme.

NPWS are now rolling out a Pilot Corncrake Farm Plan Scheme starting in 2011 and targeting mainland Corncrake areas in Donegal and Mayo. The Scheme provides financial incentives to help safeguard populations of breeding corncrakes within Corncrake Special Protection Areas (SPAs) by encouraging and supporting the sympathetic management of agricultural land. Each farm plan is to run for a period of five years and will consist of a set of management prescriptions which are designed to help maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of Corncrake breeding in these areas.

Locations of lands where the NPWS Corncrake FPS will be run

For an initial period the Corncrake FPS will be restricted to farms occurring either wholly or in part of the following SPAs:

- Malin Head SPA (no. 4146)
- Fanad Head SPA (no. 4148)
- Falcarragh to Meenlaragh SPA (no. 4149)
- Mullet Peninsula (including Termoncarragh SPA) SPA (no. 4227)

Funding for the scheme

The overall budget for this scheme is limited and therefore acceptance of these 5-year farm plans in Year 1 (2011) is not automatic and therefore will be on a competitive basis. All nominated meadow and pasture fields and ELC plots must be within the SPA. Individual plans may be allowed to proceed to plan phase following an initial selection exercise undertaken by NPWS. The selection will be based on various characteristics including specific location, nature and extent of the proposed plan. It is envisaged that a second round of 5 year farm plans will be advertised in 2012.

Subject to funding and to changes in the population and distribution of Corncrake in these areas the CFPS may then be extended to other SPAs as well as further areas identified as Secondary Corncrake Areas.

It should be noted that a range of other alternative schemes and management initiatives exist including the Corncrake Grant Scheme and the Conacre Leasing Scheme.

What will this package achieve?

This package will help to maintain or increase the Corncrake population within its current range and to encourage Corncrakes to expand their range into suitable areas nearby. It offers a range of prescriptions for managing land to benefit Corncrakes.

As Corncrakes require tall vegetation (greater than 20cm in height) from when they arrive in late April until they depart in September. Meadows which are not cut or grazed provide this tall vegetation during the main part of the corncrake breeding season and the timing of removal of this cover (through cutting or grazing) is key to survival, as is the manner of cutting if the fields are mowed.

In areas where cover for Corncrakes may be lacking early in the season (April/May), due either to exposed conditions or late grazing, provision is also made for the creation and subsequent management of areas of suitable vegetation (nettles, umbelifers, iris etc). These areas, known as Early and Late Cover (ELC) can also act as cover later in the year (August to September) after meadows have been cut.

The FPS requires that the farmer create and maintain a suitable area of ELC (Measure 1) and or maintain and promote existing areas as ELC (Measure 2). In combination with this each applicant to the scheme must opt for at least one of the following measures:

- a mown grassland management regime (Measure 3)
- a grazed grassland management regime (Measure 4)

MEASURE 1:

CREATION OF EARLY AND LATE COVER PLOTS

The aim of this Measure is to create and maintain areas which will provide vegetation cover for the protection of Corncrakes early and late in the season.

What this will achieve

This measure, carried out adjacent to the nominated fields selected for Corncrake-friendly mown or grazed grassland management, will provide cover for Corncrakes arriving back from wintering grounds in April and May and also will provide shelter late in the season when most of the surrounding grassland has been cut and/or grazed. This is because Corncrakes require vegetation which is at least 20cm (8 inches) high for the entire breeding season.

Requirements

1. This measure must be carried out adjacent to lands nominated for Measures 3 and / or 4.
2. Existing areas of suitable vegetation which meets the required standard in the required location can be extended to create the minimum patch size required
3. Ideally each individual ELC plot should be at least 0.1 ha (e.g. a 15m wide strip along the length of a 67m field).
4. Approximately 5% total area entered into the CFPS should be under ELC management. This should be undertaken in one discreet area. However this may not be possible on some farms and other arrangements may be accommodated.
5. For all new ELC areas created in year 1 of the five year plan the following requirements apply:
 - (a) No grazing is permitted from the 1st of March until the 30th of September inclusive, except with the prior written agreement.
 - (b) At other times (i.e. 1st October – 28th February inclusive) grazing must not exceed 0.3 farm LU/ha, except with the prior written agreement.
 - (c) Cutting of the area may only be undertaken with the prior written agreement of NPWS or an agent acting on their behalf.
6. The ELC plot must be adequately fenced off to a standard sufficient to ensure that the prescribed grazing levels will be adhered to (to be detailed in plan).
7. The combined maximum area per application for ELC creation is 0.5ha.

ELC creation

New early cover areas can be created during autumn/winter months or in early spring when Corncrakes are not present on their breeding grounds. Depending on local soil conditions and what type of tall vegetation is available locally, farmers should aim to create patches of tall vegetation, using the appropriate method below

Nettles

Dig up and collect rhizomes from existing areas. Mix the rhizomes with farmyard manure, ideally in at equal proportions by volume and spread the mixture over the site to a depth of approximately 15cm, but generally not less than 12 cm.

Umbellifers

Collect seeds of cow parsley or hogweed and establish through planting seeds in a prepared area in the autumn. Animal dung or farmyard manure will provide important nutrients.

Reed canary grass

Stands of reed canary grass can be created by transporting soil containing rhizomes riverbanks and other wet areas to prepared areas in autumn. This species does best in damp areas, but competition from grasses should be kept to a minimum.

Iris

Dig up and collect iris from existing beds. Mix the iris rhizomes with farmyard manure, ideally in equal proportions by volume and spread the mixture over the site to a depth of approximately 15cm, but generally not less than 12 cm. To aid the establishment of the iris, the site should normally be in a damp condition for a significant proportion of the year.

Rate of support

Payment for ELC creation and its subsequent maintenance will be spread over the duration of the 5 year plan with 30% of the total payment can be drawn down on sign up. A further 30% of the total is payable at the end of the 1st Corncrake breeding season (i.e. September – October). This latter payment is to be made on foot of an inspection carried out by an NPWS official ensuring that the ELC plot is in a satisfactory condition (following successful application of FYM and seeds/rhizomes along with the required fencing). The remaining 40% of the total payment will be available to draw down at the end of the Corncrake breeding season in equal instalments if the area is deemed to be adequately maintained from year to year.

Payment will be available to successfully create an ELC plot(s) at the following rates:

- €1.75 per m² for the first 0.1 ha
- €1.50 per m² is payable for areas greater than 0.1 ha (noting that the maximum area payable under this Measure is 0.5ha)

Ideally the proportion of ELC as a percentage of the total adjacent managed grassland regimes should be at least 5%. The maximum area that can be entered under this Measure is 0.5ha.

MEASURE 2:

MAINTENANCE AND PROMOTION OF EXISTING EARLY AND LATE COVER PLOTS

The aim of this measure is to manage areas which will provide vegetation cover for the protection of Corncrakes, their eggs and fledglings, throughout the breeding season, in particular the early and late stages when available cover is scarce. This will only apply to areas which meet the requirements outlined below on entry into the CFPS.

What this will achieve?

This measure carried out adjacent to lands under Corncrake-friendly management, will help to maintain the conditions for Corncrakes to breed successfully. It will benefit Corncrakes arriving back from wintering grounds in April and May and also provide shelter late in the season when most of the surrounding grassland has been cut and/or grazed.

Requirements

- 1 This measure must be carried out adjacent to lands nominated for Measures 3 and / or 4.
- 2 Each individual area must be at least 0.1 hectares
- 3 Approximately 50% (but not less than 30%) of the area must comprise suitable early cover vegetation (to include nettles, hogweed, cow parsley, reed canary grass, iris). This may require application of farmyard manure and seeds/rhizomes in some years to encourage growth of required species early in the year. Advice will be available from NPWS during the farm plan formulation stage.
- 4 Rush must be at densities of no more than 30% and any encroaching scrub (e.g. briars) should be controlled on an annual basis as per plan.
- 5 Grazing is not permitted from 1st of March until the 30th of September inclusive except with the prior written agreement. Grazing in October may be required to prevent the area becoming too rank and to provide additional nutrients to stimulate growth of early cover vegetation.
- 6 Cutting of the area may only be undertaken with the prior written agreement from the NPWS official or an authorised agent of NPWS
- 7 The combined area of existing and created early and late cover for corncrakes managed under a single agreement cannot exceed 5 hectares.
- 8 A maximum of 5 ha of suitable land will be allowed into this option.

Rate of annual support

A stepped per hectare rate is payable annually for the maintenance and enhancement of existing ELC plots - provided the required cover is present throughout the breeding season of each year. The rates are as follows:

Up to 0.1 ha	@ €380 per ha
0.11 – 0.25 ha.	@ €440 per ha
Greater than 0.26 ha	@ €220 per ha (noting that the maximum area payable under this Measure is 5ha)

MEASURE 3:

MOWN GRASSLAND

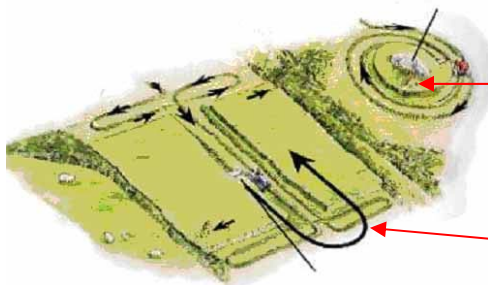
The aim of this measure is to provide protection for Corncrakes during the main part of the breeding season.

What this will achieve?

This measure will create or maintain the conditions necessary for Corncrakes to nest and raise broods, including the provision of tall vegetation cover throughout the summer.

Requirements

1. This measure must be carried out in combination with the creation and maintenance of at least one ELC plot (Measure 1) and/or in combination with the maintenance and promotion of existing ELC plots (Measure 2).
2. Provide meadows with tall vegetation (>20 cm, 8 inches) suitable for Corncrakes to nest and raise broods (approximately 50% or more of the meadow should meet this requirement by early May). Stock shall be excluded from these areas from the 15th of March onwards. The meadow shall not be cut or topped before the dates shown below.
3. Other field operations requiring the use of tractor machinery (fertilising, rolling, spraying, etc.) shall not be permitted from the 20th April until the prescribed date of mowing. Field operations that do not require the use of tractor machinery (such as hand spraying) are permitted.
4. If you are informed by an NPWS official or an agent acting on behalf of NPWS that a Corncrake has been recorded in or within 250m of a nominated meadow that is entered into the CFPS, the meadow is deemed to be *active* for that particular breeding season. This meadow must not be cut until at least the 20th of August. A further measure of delaying the mowing date until 1st September can be opted for instead.
5. Generally these meadows should be cut / topped every year with the crop removed by October 1st.
6. A 1.8m/6ft margin must be left along each of the two long sides of the field. This is to provide an escape refuge during mowing. The margin can be grazed or mown after the 15th of September. Generally margins should be cut / topped or grazed down at least one year in three (as detailed in the farm plan). A contiguous ELC can replace the need for such a margin.
7. To minimise the risk of injury to young birds, all active fields must be cut in a Corncrake friendly manner: The aim should be to prevent the creation of islands of uncut hay or silage and the line of cutting from the middle outwards should leave an escape route through the uncut margins. Note that in some circumstances the ELC if appropriately sited (i.e. along the edge of the meadow) may reduce the need for leaving an uncut margin.



Mowing towards rocky knoll to leave a sizeable refuge area of unmown grass

After opening up 2 ends, the field is mowed from the middle outwards

Rate of annual support

- July 15th meadow mowing: €275 per hectare
- August 20th meadow mowing: €450 per hectare

- September 1st meadow mowing: €510 per hectare

MEASURE 4:

GRAZED GRASSLAND

Where it is not possible (or desirable) to mow meadows, this measure will support the management of grazed grasslands to encourage suitable conditions for the benefit of breeding Corncrake.

What this will achieve?

By limiting and managing grazing, the grazed grassland measure will promote the growth of vegetation of suitable structure and species composition to provide sufficient tall vegetation which will provide cover throughout the summer to allow Corncrakes to nest and raise broods successfully.

Requirements

1. This measure must be carried out in combination with the creation and maintenance of at least one ELC plot (Measure 1) and/or in combination with the maintenance and promotion of existing ELC plots (Measure 2).
2. The pasture field should be contiguous with the ELC plot. The pasture should contain a high proportion (approximately 50%, but not less than 30%) of vegetation that is both likely to be taller than 20 cm (8 inches) by early May and be suitable for Corncrakes if left ungrazed (e.g. iris, nettles, cow parsley or reed canary grass). Areas with rush could be selected where it occurs as patches and where the density is not above 30%. Areas of ungrazed grass or rush matted with dead vegetation remaining from previous seasons will not qualify as suitable tall vegetation
3. Minimum area to be included is 0.5 ha. Farm livestock must be removed from areas entered under this measure before 15th of March.
4. Other field operations requiring the use of tractor machinery (fertilising, rolling, spraying, etc.) shall not be permitted from the 20th April until the prescribed date of grazing. Field operations that do not require the use of tractor machinery (such as hand spraying) are permitted.
5. If the pasture is deemed to be active (i.e. Corncrake recorded calling from within the field or within 250m) by an NPWS official or an agent acting on behalf of NPWS, then livestock are not permitted to graze until August 20th. Farm livestock may be returned after this date, although livestock density must be no more than 1.4 LU per ha until September 15th.

Rate of annual support

- post July 15th pasture grazing: €275 per hectare
- post August 20th pasture grazing: €450 per hectare