

Ox Mountains Bogs SAC (site code 2006)
Conservation objectives supporting document
- upland habitats

NPWS

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1 Introduction

Achieving Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) is the overall objective to be reached for all Annex I habitat types and Annex II species of European Community interest listed in the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC. It is defined in positive terms, such that a habitat type or species must be prospering and have good prospects of continuing to do so.

Almost 19% of Ireland can be considered to support upland habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2009). The importance of these areas for biodiversity conservation is unquestionable, with numerous upland habitat types listed under Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive and many rare and threatened bird and other animal species being associated with these habitats. This is reflected in the fact that over 40% of the total terrestrial area currently selected for designation as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in Ireland lies above 150m in altitude.

The Scoping Study and Pilot Survey of Upland Habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2009) was commissioned by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with the primary remit of devising an appropriate strategy and methodologies for conducting a National Survey of Upland Habitats (NSUH). Four phases of the NSUH have subsequently been conducted between 2010 and 2014. The Annex I habitats that are the primary focus of the NSUH are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Annex I habitats that occur in Irish uplands and which are primary focus habitats for the NSUH. Habitats in bold are those that are listed as Qualifying Interests for Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.

Habitat code	Habitat name
4010	Northern Atlantic wet heaths with <i>Erica tetralix</i>
4030	European dry heaths
4060	Alpine and Boreal heaths
6230	Species-rich <i>Nardus</i> grasslands, on siliceous substrates in mountain areas (and submountain areas, in Continental Europe)*
7130	Blanket bogs (* if active)
7140	Transition mires and quaking bogs
7150	Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion
7230	Alkaline fens
8110	Siliceous screes of the montane to snow levels (<i>Androsacetalia alpinae</i> and <i>Galeopsietalia ladani</i>)
8120	Calcareous and calcshist screes of the montane to alpine levels (<i>Thlaspietea rotundifolii</i>)
8210	Calcareous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation
8220	Siliceous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation

* Denotes a priority habitat under the EU Habitats Directive

1.1 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC

Ox Mountains Bogs SAC was surveyed as part of the NSUH between April and July 2012. The results of the survey are reported in Perrin *et al.* (2013).

It is a large upland SAC, 105.7km² in extent and is centred on Easky Lough stretching from near Cloonacool in the south-east, to near Bunnyconnellan in the west and to near Dromore West in the north (O.S. Discovery Series maps 24 and 25). It consists of three main areas. To the west of Easky

Lough are two extensive areas of relatively low-lying blanket bog at Letterunshin and Fiddandarry whilst to the east of Easky Lough is the main upland area at Laughil. On the lower slopes in the northern part of the upland section, the SAC encompasses Easky Bog Nature Reserve (6.1km² in extent). The underlying geology is mainly schists, with limestone in the north-west near Letterunshin and a large granite intrusion forming the hillside to the east of Easky Lough. The highest peak within the SAC is close to Loughannatoran (alt. 512m). The highest peak within the Ox Mountains, Knockalongy (alt. 544m), lies outside the SAC to the north-east, as does a substantial area of the Slieve Gamph range to the south-west.

1.2 NSUH mapping methodology

A brief description of the methodology used to map habitats by the NSUH is presented here to elucidate how area was calculated for each of the habitats and to explain how the graduated distribution maps were produced. For full details, see Perrin *et al.* (2014).

The local topography of most upland areas consists of intricate patterns of hollows, rocky outcrops, flushes and terraces. The mosaics of vegetation that have developed on this varying topography is often far too complex to map as individual habitats in the manner possible for more uniform landscapes. Hence the approach adopted by the NSUH was to map units (referred to as polygons) that reflect homogeneous mosaics of vegetation and topography. Attempting to map smaller polygons representing single habitats would have greatly increased the amount of time spent mapping and the number of polygons mapped, and would not ultimately have eliminated the need for recording mosaics at smaller scales. All the habitats and non-vegetated substrates present in each polygon and the approximate percentage of the polygon they occupy were recorded. As the total area of each polygon is known from digitisation, data on the approximate extent of each habitat can be readily calculated. A provisional vegetation classification of upland vegetation types was developed to allow more detailed recording of plant communities than would be possible using a habitat classification scheme such as Fossitt (2000).

It is important to note that the NSUH classified and assessed habitats according to the flora and vegetation communities currently present rather than that which may previously have occurred. For example, on an area of drained deep wet blanket peat the current plant communities may be more akin to wet heath than blanket bog as species sensitive to desiccation may have disappeared after drainage. Such an area would therefore have been mapped as wet heath (current vegetation) rather than drained blanket bog. As a result of this approach, the only vegetation classified and mapped as the inactive component of 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) was *Eriophorum angustifolium* – *Sphagnum fallax* swards on eroded bog where a reasonable depth of peat remains. The Fossitt (2000) habitat PB4 Bare peat was used for recently cutover areas of peat. Where older cutover areas had revegetated to another vegetation community, or supported a non-vegetation cover type, they were recorded under the relevant vegetation community.

Note that the NSUH used the most up to date SAC boundary dataset available at the time of survey. For Ox Mountains Bogs SAC this was the boundary available in April 2012, which was based on the Ordnance Survey six-inch map base. Any areas calculated and presented here are based on this boundary version.

1.3 Potential for habitat restoration

There are significant areas of non-Annex I upland grassland within Ox Mountains Bogs SAC (Perrin *et al.*, 2013). This vegetation is frequent on the slopes west of Glendarragh Lough, in the Cloonacool Valley and north-east of Easky Lough. The majority of the grassland has probably been formed by long-term degradation of 4010 Wet heaths due to overgrazing and/or burning. Therefore, within this expanse there are potential areas for restoration to 4010 Wet heaths. The remaining area of grassland is likely to have originated from 4030 Dry heaths.

It will be clear later in this document that restoration management for 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) is required. Areas that might be restored to active blanket bog could include inactive bog, bare eroding bog and recent cutover bog, and also areas of drained deep peat or older cutovers which currently support other types of vegetation such as heath. These latter areas may currently be classified as other Annex I habitats (e.g. 4010). Restoration of priority 7130 habitat may therefore result in loss in the area and distribution of other Annex I habitats which are Qualifying Interests. If such scenarios are identified by restoration management plans, the conservation objectives for these other Qualifying Interests should be amended accordingly.

2 Conservation objectives

A site-specific conservation objective aims to define the favourable conservation condition of a habitat or species at site level. The maintenance of habitats and species within sites at favourable condition will contribute to the maintenance of favourable conservation status (FCS) of those habitats and species at a national level.

Conservation objectives are defined using attributes and targets that are based on parameters as set out in the Habitats Directive for defining favourable status, namely area, range, and structure and functions.

The *Guidelines for a national survey and conservation assessment of upland vegetation and habitats in Ireland* (Perrin *et al.*, 2014) have been used as a basis for setting most site-specific attributes and targets for uplands habitats. Attributes and targets may change/become more refined as further information becomes available.

Objectives for habitats have been set with reference to the assessment of those habitats in Perrin *et al.* (2013). If area and structure and functions were both assessed as “Favourable”, the objective for that habitat is to maintain favourable conservation condition. If either parameter was assessed as “Unfavourable – Inadequate” or “Unfavourable – Bad”, the objective for that habitat is to restore favourable conservation condition.

This document provides supporting information for the attributes of the conservation objectives of upland habitats, given in the main conservation objectives document for the SAC. The two documents should be read in conjunction with each other.

The conservation objective for each of the Annex I habitats dealt with in this supporting document are as follows:

- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Northern Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix* in Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.
- To maintain the favourable conservation condition of European dry heaths in Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.
- To restore the favourable conservation condition of Blanket bogs in Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.
- To maintain the favourable conservation condition of Transition mires and quaking bogs in Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.
- To maintain the favourable conservation condition of Depressions on peat substrates of the Rhynchosporion in Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.

3 Area

Habitat extent is a basic attribute to be assessed when determining the condition of a particular habitat. The target is to maintain or increase the extent from the baseline which was established by Perrin *et al.* (2013) and these areas are reproduced in Table 2.

Table 2: Mapped extent of Annex I habitats that are listed as Qualifying Interests for Ox Mountains Bogs SAC.

*denotes priority habitat.

Annex I code	Habitat	Area (ha)	% of SAC
4010	Wet heaths	1083.2	10.2
4030	Dry heaths	332.9	3.1
7130	Active blanket bogs*	7097.3	67.1
7130	Inactive blanket bogs	152.3	1.4
7140	Transition mires	36.6	0.3
7150	Rhynchosporion depressions	49.6	0.5

As mentioned earlier, the area of habitat 7130 comprises active and inactive blanket bogs. The most frequent example of the latter encountered in the NSUH is described in Perrin *et al.* (2014) as a monospecific sward of *Eriophorum angustifolium* on eroded bog where a reasonable depth of peat remains. Note however, that while examples of this community occur on re-deposited, eroded peat, these areas will not have the structural, hydrological or functional characteristics of naturally formed blanket bog.

Loss of area since 1995 was investigated as part of the NSUH through a comparison of contemporary and past aerial photographs (Perrin *et al.*, 2013). Changes in areas that can be detected through this method are limited to obvious habitat changes such as mechanised turf-cutting, agricultural improvement, afforestation, the development of windfarms, roads or tracks and large-scale discrete erosion events due to bog bursts or land slips. Where obvious anthropogenic losses have been identified, these are included in the area target.

In the case of 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active), it has not been practical to distinguish between habitat loss/deterioration due to chronic erosion that occurred prior to 1995 and that since 1995, or the causes of such erosion. Thus, the habitat area mapped, along with obvious losses, is likely to be an under-estimate of the total area of 7130 Blanket bog (* if active) present in 1995. See also the peat formation attribute under structure and functions.

4 Range

A habitat's range at site level, in the form of habitat distribution, has been recorded through the mapping carried out through the NSUH and these are reproduced (see maps 1-5). The target is that there should be no decline from the current distribution.

5 Structure and functions

Structure and functions relates to the physical components of a habitat ("structure") and the ecological processes that drive it ("functions"). For upland habitats these include a range of aspects such as soil chemistry, vegetation composition, hydrological regime, community diversity, habitat quality, species occurrence, indicators of local distinctiveness, disturbed ground, evidence of burning and negative species occurrence. These structure and functions are expanded on in the sections below.

At Ox Mountains Bogs SAC the structure and functions of 4010 Wet heaths were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad. Reasons for failure varied and included inadequate cover of desirable species including positive indicator species, ericoid species and mosses and lichens. Excessive cover of dwarf shrub species was recorded at some locations, there was also excessive cover of the negative indicator species common bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) and the non-native species moss *Campylopus introflexus*. Inappropriate burning, excessive grazing and disturbed bare ground due to the presence of sheep paths were recorded.

7130/7130 Blanket bogs* were assessed as Unfavourable – Bad. Reasons for failure varied and included inadequate cover of bryophyte and lichen species and positive indicator species in some locations. There was excessive cover of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) or deergrass (*Trichophorum germanicum*), excessive cover of the negative indicator species common bent (*Agrostis capillaris*) and excessive non-native species cover. Inappropriate burning was recorded, as were excessive levels of grazing by sheep, peat erosion, drainage and disturbed bare ground.

The structure and functions of 4030 Dry heaths, 7140 Transition mires and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions were assessed as Favourable.

5.1 Ecosystem function

Ecosystem function is assessed primarily through consideration of soil nutrient levels. For 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active), additional consideration is given to peat formation and hydrology.

5.1.1 Ecosystem function: soil nutrients

An attribute to assess the soil nutrients is common to each of the upland habitats with a view to maintaining the soil nutrient status within the natural range suited to the habitat. Relevant nutrients and natural ranges have yet to be defined. Nitrogen deposition and associated acidification are noted as being relevant to all upland habitats in NPWS (2013). The target for each habitat is to maintain the soil nutrients status within the natural range.

5.1.2 Ecosystem function: peat formation

Ecosystem function of 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) is further assessed through peat formation. Perrin *et al.* (2014) established an overriding assessment of blanket bog structure and functions based on the proportion of degraded bog within a site which includes eroding bog and cutover bog which would previously have been this Annex I habitat. If more than 1% of the combined area of active bogs (Annex I habitat 7130*), inactive bogs (Annex I habitat 7130), eroded bogs (habitat category PB5 – Fossitt 2000) and recently cutover bogs (habitat PB4 – Fossitt 2000) is inactive, eroded or cutover then it should be assessed as Unfavourable – Inadequate even if the results of the monitoring stops are more positive. If more than 5% of the combined area is inactive, eroded or cutover it is assessed as Unfavourable - Bad.

The EU habitats interpretation manual (EC, 2013) defines active blanket bog as “still supporting a significant area of vegetation that is normally peat-forming”. For the purposes of defining favourable conservation condition of the Annex I habitat, the target is that at least 99% of the total Annex I blanket bog area is active bog.

5.1.3 Ecosystem function: hydrology

Ecosystem function of 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) is further assessed through assessment of hydrology. Drains (cut for purposes of peat cutting, afforestation etc.) and erosion gullies impact on the hydrology of blanket bog in the local vicinity. The target is for the natural hydrology to be unaffected by drains and erosion gullies. The process of restoring hydrological integrity may impact areas of heath habitats as discussed in Section 1.3.

5.2 Community diversity

Perrin *et al.* (2013) recorded habitat information based on a provisional list of vegetation communities which is detailed in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014). Data is presented in the following tables on the abundance of the various communities that comprise Qualifying Interest habitats at Ox Mountains Bogs SAC together with the area of each of these communities and the percentage of the SAC that these communities cover (hepatic mats associated with Qualifying Interests are considered under the indicators of local distinctiveness attribute). 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions are defined by just one provisional vegetation community; therefore the community diversity attribute is not applied to this habitat.

The target is to maintain the variety of vegetation communities subject to natural processes.

5.2.1 Community diversity data for 4010 Wet heaths

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
WH1	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i> – <i>Erica tetralix</i> wet heath	5.7	0.1
WH2	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Cladonia</i> spp. – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> wet heath	0.5	0.01
WH3	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Molinia caerulea</i> – <i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i> wet/damp heath	706.7	6.7
WH4	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> wet heath	218.2	2.0
WH5	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Nardus stricta</i> – <i>Racomitrium lanuginosum</i> montane wet heath	3.2	0.03
WH6	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i> – <i>Molinia caerulea</i> – <i>Myrica gale</i> wet heath	148.8	1.4

5.2.2 Community diversity data for 4030 Dry heaths

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
DH3	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Erica cinerea</i> dry heath	248.9	2.4
DH4	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Sphagnum capillifolium</i> dry /damp heath	49.1	0.5
DH6	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> dry heath	34.8	0.3

5.2.3 Community diversity data for 7130 Blanket bogs*

Only active bog communities are shown.

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
BB1	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> bog	6.4	0.1
BB2	<i>Schoenus nigricans</i> – <i>Sphagnum</i> spp. bog	2.1	0.02
BB3	<i>Eriophorum vaginatum</i> – <i>Sphagnum papillosum</i> bog	286.9	2.7
BB4	<i>Trichophorum germanicum</i> – <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> bog	2502.9	23.7
BB5	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> – <i>Eriophorum</i> spp. bog	3299.5	31.2
BB7	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> – <i>Sphagnum austinii</i> bog	886.4	8.4
HW1	<i>Sphagnum denticulatum/cuspidatum</i> hollow	113.0	1.1

5.2.4 Community diversity data for 7140 Transition mires

NSUH code	NSUH community	Area (ha)	% of SAC
PO1a	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i> – <i>Carex limosa</i> pool community infilling pool sub-community	6.4	0.1
PFLU5	<i>Carex rostrata</i> – <i>Sphagnum</i> spp. flush	29.6	0.3
RFEN1b	<i>Carex rostrata</i> fen species-poor sub-community	0.6	0.01

5.3 Vegetation composition

Vegetation composition is assessed through a range of attributes tailored to each of the habitats. In general terms they establish minimum thresholds for the occurrence, or cover, of desirable species and maximum thresholds for undesirable species.

5.3.1 Vegetation composition: positive indicator species

An attribute for positive indicator species is common to each of the upland Annex I habitats and habitat-specific lists of the positive indicator species are presented in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.* 2014). A positive species criterion is set to ensure that vegetation remains representative of the habitat and is not degrading or succeeding to a different habitat. The target by which this attribute is measured varies between habitats. Descriptions of these habitats can be found in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014).

For some habitats a certain number of positive indicator species are required. At least seven positive indicator species are required for 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and at least five are required for 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. 7140 Transition mires require at least three positive indicator species for in-filling pools and flushes and at least six for fens and also at least one core positive indicator species present at each monitoring stop. In addition, 25% total cover of positive indicator species is required.

For other habitats a percentage threshold is set. For example, at least 50% cover of positive indicators is required for 4010 Wet heaths.

4030 Dry heaths are assessed through the number of positive indicator species present and through the percentage cover of these. The positive indicator list is composed of dwarf shrub species. Only two species are required to meet the number of positive indicator species target as dry heaths are not necessarily rich in these species. However, vegetation supporting and possibly dominated by only one dwarf shrub species is not desirable. Low cover of dwarf shrubs would indicate that the habitat is transitional, usually to grassland. A maximum cover of dwarf shrubs is applied for calcareous heath, which was not recorded at Ox Mountains Bogs SAC by Perrin *et al.* (2013), due to the characteristically greater forb (broad-leaved herb) component.

5.3.2 Vegetation composition: other desirable species

Other elements of vegetation composition which can collectively be regarded as being desirable are also established with a range of habitat specific targets set.

Lichens and bryophytes

Minimum thresholds for cover of lichens and bryophytes are set for habitats where a plentiful lichen/moss layer is characteristic: 4010 Wet heaths and 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active), and for 4030 Dry heaths. The latter habitat is not necessarily rich in lichen and bryophyte species, but a minimum amount should still be present. Within the habitat specific targets for these attributes the specific species or groups of species which are required are listed, together with any exclusions (e.g. *Sphagnum fallax* can be indicative of degraded bog so is excluded from the 7130 Blanket bogs (* if

active) assessment and *Campylopus* and *Polytrichum* mosses are excluded from 4030 Dry heaths as they can be indicative of disturbed conditions).

Cross-leaved heath

Cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) is specifically mentioned in the formal title of habitat 4010 Wet heaths and is the only characteristic species listed in European Commission (2013). Whilst it is seldom abundant in wet heath its presence at high frequencies is considered one of the few characteristics common between the varied communities of this habitat (JNCC, 2009). The target is for the presence of cross-leaved heath within a 20m radius of each monitoring stop.

Ericoid species and crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*)

A dwarf shrub layer with ericoid species is characteristic of 4010 Wet heaths (crowberry is only rarely present). Low cover of these species would be indicative of chronic overgrazing, burning etc. The target is for at least 15% cover of these species.

***Rhynchospora* species**

A relatively plentiful cover of *Rhynchospora* spp. is characteristic of 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. The target is for at least 10% cover of these species.

5.3.3 Vegetation composition: negative indicator species

A percentage cover threshold for negative indicator species has been established for all the upland habitats listed as a qualifying interest for Ox Mountains Bogs SAC. Habitat specific negative indicator species lists have been established for each of the habitats (Perrin *et al.*, 2014). Presence of these species would likely indicate undesirable impacts of management such as overgrazing, undergrazing, nutrient enrichment, agricultural improvement or impacts on hydrology. The percentage threshold is generally set quite low such that impacts can be reversed before they become more severe.

5.3.4 Vegetation composition: non-native species

An attribute for non-native species is common to each of the upland Annex I habitats. Non-native species can be invasive and have deleterious effects on native vegetation. The target for each habitat is for the total cover of non-native species to be less than 1%. A low target is set as non-native species can spread rapidly and are most easily dealt with when still at lower abundances.

5.3.5 Vegetation composition: undesirable native species

For many habitats maximum percentage cover thresholds for undesirable native species are also set. These are detailed below.

Bracken, native trees and shrubs

The cover of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and native trees and shrubs is assessed for 4010 Wet heaths and 4030 Dry heaths. Tree and shrub cover is assessed for 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. High cover of bracken would indicate that the habitat may be succeeding towards a dense bracken community, and high cover of native trees and shrubs would

indicate that the habitat may be succeeding towards scrub or woodland due to lack of grazing or, for bog habitats, due to the habitat drying out.

Soft rush

High cover of soft rush (*Juncus effusus*) in 4010 Wet heaths or 4030 Dry heaths would suggest undesirable hydrological conditions. Note however, that poor flushes dominated by soft rush often naturally occur in mosaic with these habitats. Discrete areas of this separate habitat should not be considered here. The target is for the cover of soft rush to be less than 10%.

Potential dominant species

For 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions a maximum threshold is given for bog species which could potentially dominate the habitat, reflecting a reduction in diversity. The selected bog species for 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) are ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), many-stalked spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), hare's-tail cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*), purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), black bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and deergrass (*Trichoporum germanicum*). For 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions the potentially dominant species are many-stalked spike-rush (*Eleocharis multicaulis*), purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), black bog-rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and deergrass (*Trichoporum germanicum*). For 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) the target is for cover of each of the potential dominant species to be less than 75% and for 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions the cover of each of the potential dominant species less than 35%.

Dwarf shrub cover

A dwarf shrub layer is characteristic of 4010 Wet heaths but the vegetation should be a mixture of dwarf shrub and graminoid species with higher cover of dwarf shrubs being potentially indicative of drainage. A maximum target of 75% is therefore set.

Similarly the calcareous version of 4030 Dry heaths, which was not recorded at Ox Mountains Bogs SAC by Perrin *et al.* (2013), characteristically has a greater component of broad-leaved herbs than siliceous dry heath. A maximum target of 75% is therefore set.

Dwarf shrub composition

The dwarf shrub layer within 4030 Dry heaths should not be composed primarily of bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*), creeping willow (*Salix repens*) and western gorse (*Ulex gallii*). Bog-myrtle is indicative of flushed conditions and is more characteristic of wet heaths and blanket bogs. Creeping willow is more characteristic of dune heaths. Western gorse is a component of dry heath, but high proportions of it may indicate a history of undesirable levels of grazing. The target for 4030 Dry heaths is for the proportion of dwarf shrub composed of these species to be collectively less than 50%.

5.4 Vegetation structure

Vegetation structure is assessed through a number of attributes tailored to each of the habitats. These measures assess levels of grazing and browsing, burning, *Sphagnum* condition and, for 4030 Dry heaths, growth phases of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*).

5.4.1 Browsing and grazing

Browsing is generally measured through viewing the last complete season's shoots of particular species and assessing the proportion which shows signs of having been browsed. The species which are assessed for browsing are generally the dwarf shrub species: ericoids, crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*) and bog-myrtle (*Myrica gale*). The target for 4010 Wet heaths, 4030 Dry heaths, 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions is for less than 33% of shoots to show signs of grazing. Grazing levels for 7140 Transition mires are assessed through vegetation height (see Section 5.4.4).

5.4.2 Burning

Fires can be part of the natural cycle of heath and peatlands and may also be used as a valuable management tool to promote a diversity of growth phases in ling (*Calluna vulgaris*). However, currently most hill fires in Ireland are intentionally started to encourage grass growth for livestock. Fires which are too intense, too frequent, too extensive or which occur in sensitive areas are damaging to habitats. An assessment of burning is made for the heath habitats, 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. Habitat-specific lists of sensitive areas where burning should not occur are presented in Perrin *et al.* (2014). Examples of sensitive areas are: 'areas where soils are thin and less than 5cm deep' and 'pools, wet hollows, hags and erosion gullies, and within 5-10m of the edge of watercourses'.

4010 Wet heaths, 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions have the same targets relating to there being no signs of burning into the moss, liverwort or lichen layer or exposure of peat surface due to burning and no signs of burning in sensitive areas. The target for 4030 Dry heaths is no sign of burning in sensitive areas.

5.4.3 Sphagnum condition

Disturbance to *Sphagnum* is assessed for habitats 4010 Wet heaths, 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. High levels of disturbed *Sphagnum* would indicate undesirable levels of grazers. For each of the habitats the target is for less than 10% of the *Sphagnum* cover to be crushed, broken and/or pulled up.

5.4.4 Vegetation height

Vegetation height is used as an indication of grazing intensity for 7140 Transition mires. The proportion of live leaves and/or flowering shoots of vascular plants that are more than 15cm above the ground surface should be at least 50%. Vegetation heights lower than these would indicate undesirable levels of grazing.

5.4.5 Growth phases of ling

The growth phases of ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) are assessed for 4030 Dry heaths. The growth phases are pioneer (<10cm high), building (10-30cm high) and mature (>30cm high). The target is that all growth phases of ling should occur throughout the habitat, outside sensitive areas, with at least 10% of cover in the mature phase. As burning is undesirable within sensitive areas, it is not reasonable to

require the stated diversity of growth phases within these areas. The list of sensitive areas is presented in the NSUH manual (Perrin *et al.*, 2014).

5.4.6 Senescent ling

The cover of senescent ling (*Calluna vulgaris*) in 4030 Dry heaths is also assessed. Senescence is part of the natural cycle of ling but a dominance of ling in the senescent phase would indicate a lack of management (appropriate grazing or burning) to promote ling regeneration. The target is that the cover of senescent ling should be less than 50%.

5.5 Physical structure

The physical structure of upland habitats can be damaged by drainage, walking trails, unsuitable levels of grazing and erosion. Physical structure is assessed through a number of attributes tailored to each of the habitats. Elements which are assessed for the various habitats comprise disturbed bare ground, drainage and erosion; these are detailed below.

5.5.1 Disturbed bare ground

This attribute is common to all the upland habitats listed as qualifying interests for Ox Mountains Bogs SAC. Disturbance can include hoof marks, wallows, human foot prints and vehicle and machinery tracks. Excessive disturbance can result in loss of characteristic species and presage erosion for heaths and peatlands. The target for each habitat is set at there being less than 10% disturbed ground.

5.5.2 Drainage

Drainage can result in loss of characteristic species and transition to drier habitats. This attribute is applied to 4010 Wet heaths, 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active), 7140 Transition mires and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. For each habitat the target is the area showing signs of drainage from heavy trampling, tracking or ditches to be less than 10%.

5.5.3 Erosion

Erosion is assessed for 7130 Blanket bogs (* if active) and 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions. Erosion leads to loss of peat from the blanket bog system, increases in peat sediment in nearby water courses, loss of blanket bog habitat and drainage. The target for both habitats is less than 5% of the greater bog mosaic comprises erosion gullies and eroded areas. The greater bog mosaic incorporates the blanket bog itself and associated vegetation types and non-vegetation cover types that appear to have been derived from former blanket bog, including, but not limited to bare peat, loose rock, gravel and running water.

5.6 Indicators of local distinctiveness

Perrin *et al.* (2013) compiled and mapped existing rare and notable plant records for the SAC and added any new records collected during the NSUH survey. Rare species (those considered at least Near Threatened on the appropriate Red Data List which could be assigned to a particular habitat, either through waypoint data collected during the NSUH or expert judgement, were considered

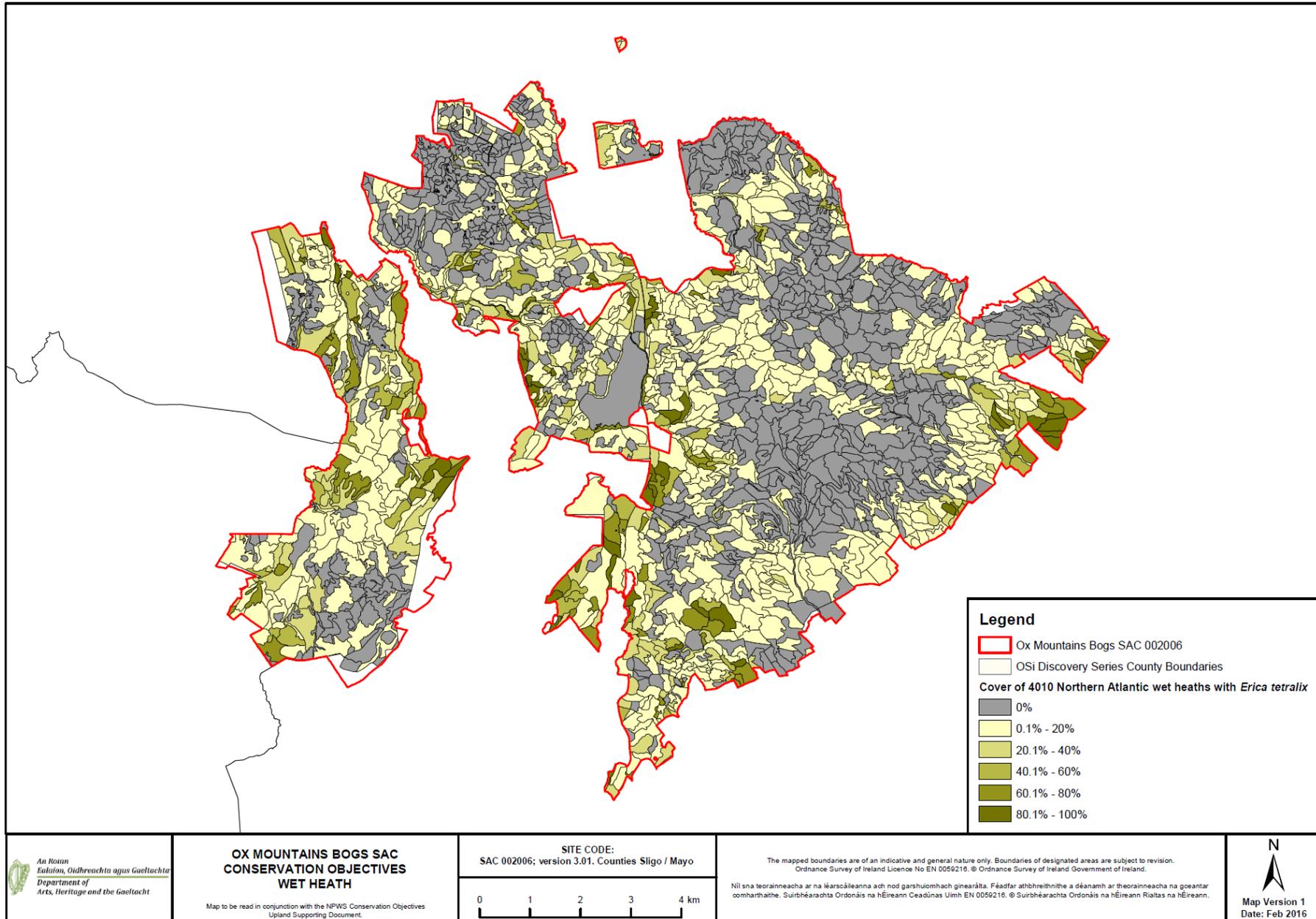
indicators of local distinctiveness for habitats. The target is for no decline in distribution or population sizes of rare, threatened or scarce species associated with the habitat.

Where hepatic mats of the *Calluna vulgaris-Herbertus aduncus* community were recorded within a particular habitat by Perrin *et al.* (2013) these are also listed as indicators of local distinctiveness. No assessment of the conservation status of this community has been conducted but proposals for such an assessment are presented in Barron & Perrin (2014). The target for these hepatic mats is for no decline in status of hepatic mats associated with this habitat.

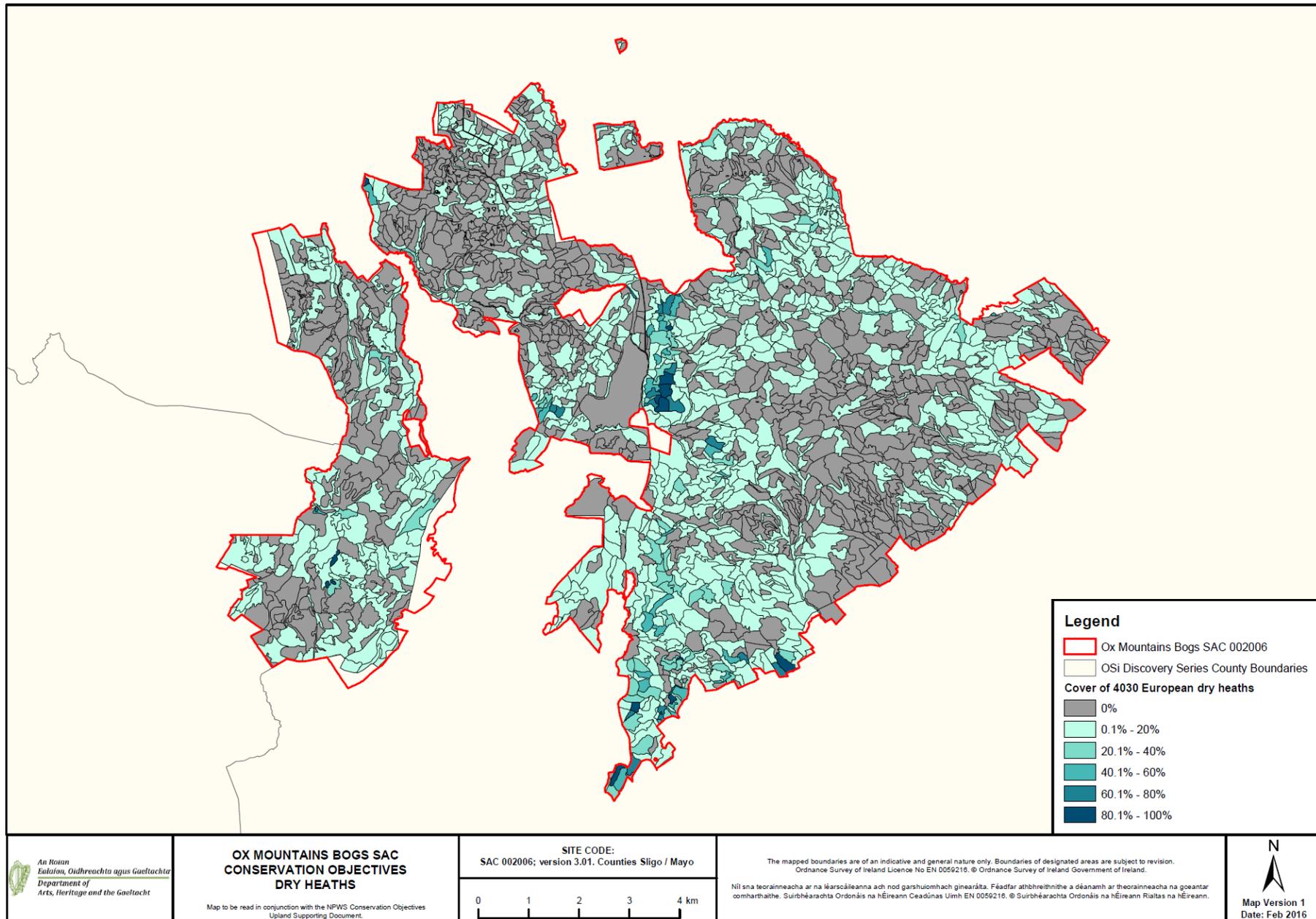
6 References

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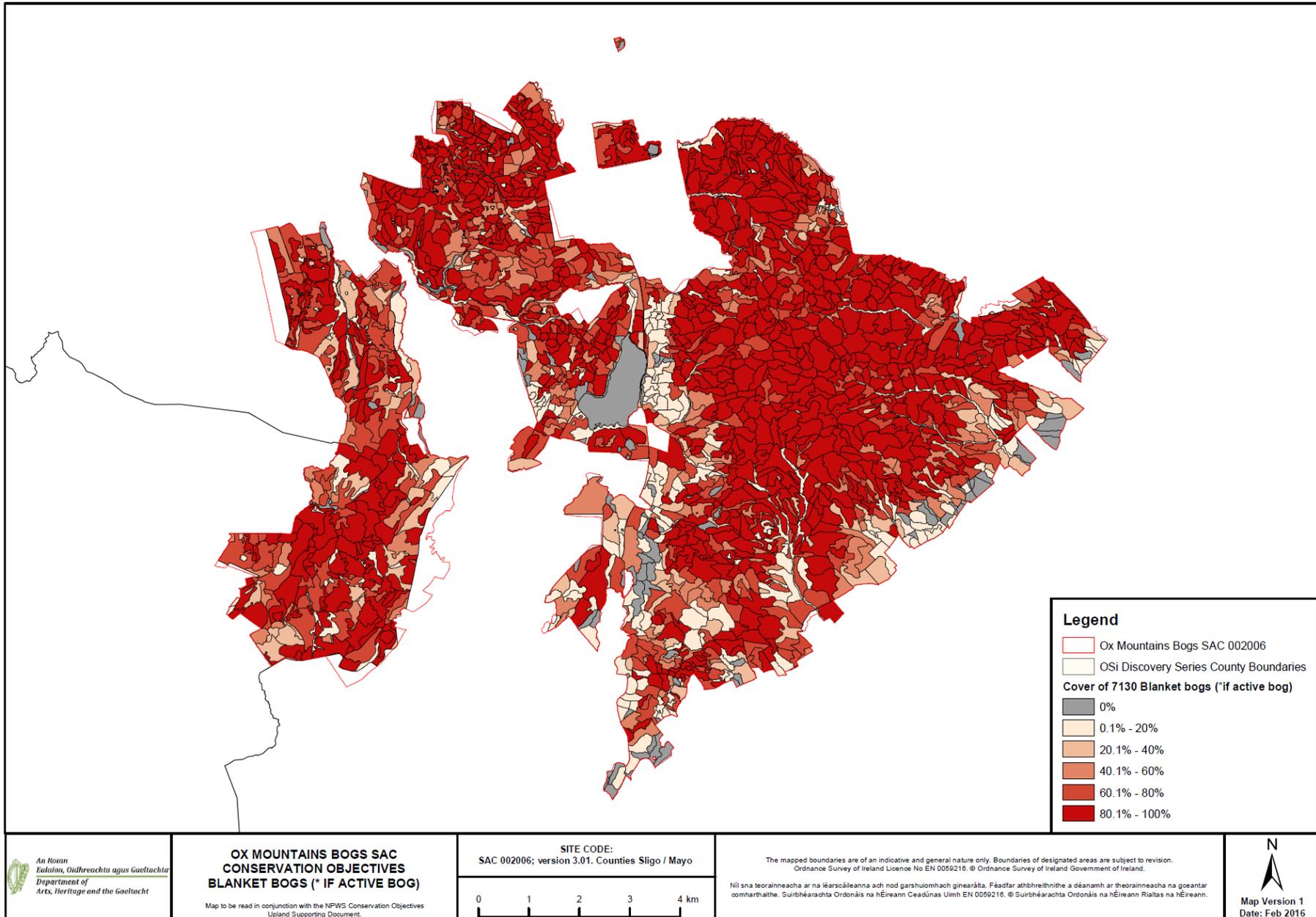
Map 1 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC Conservation Objectives – 4010 Wet Heaths



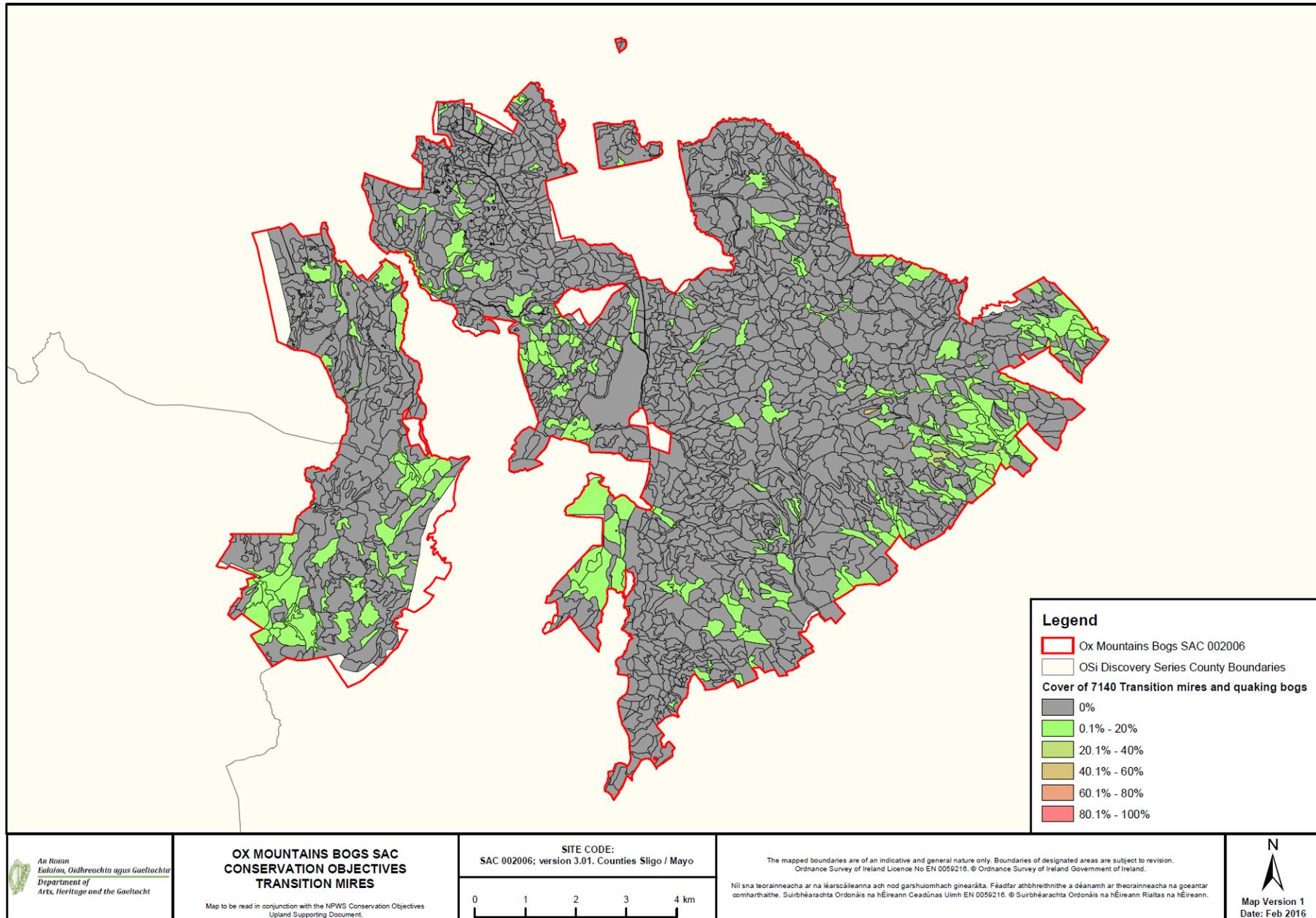
Map 2 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC Conservation Objectives – 4030 Dry Heaths



Map 3 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC Conservation Objectives – 7130 Blanket Bogs (* if active)



Map 4 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC Conservation Objectives – 7140 Transition mires



Map 5 Ox Mountains Bogs SAC Conservation Objectives – 7150 Rhynchosporion depressions

