



LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature Call for Tender

Delivery of Conservation Measures using Natura Communities approach with a focus on building capacity to deliver peatland restoration measures including control of *Rhododendron ponticum* in the Killarney National Park, Macgillicuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC (000365)

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An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing,
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Table of Contents

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature	1
Call for Tender	1
Background.....	3
Scope of work and deliverables	3
Call for Tender	4
Tasks.....	4
<i>Task 1: Project administration and governance.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Task 2: Community and stakeholder engagement.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Task 3: Regulatory compliance and consents.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Task 4: Surveying, mapping and planning.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Task 5: Training & capacity building for farmers and operatives (where required).....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Task 6: Implementation of Rhododendron control and maintenance works</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Task 7: Implementation of peatland restoration and erosion measures (Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC).....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Task 8: Development of the Natura Communities approach and future planning.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Task 9: Data management, reporting, and educational outputs</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Task 10: Provision of costed rate of delivery of works</i>	<i>9</i>
Minimum eligibility requirements	9
General requirements in response to this CFT	10
Indicative budget	11
Payments, contractual liaison	11
Award Criteria	12
Services Contract	12
Instructions to the Supplier	12
<i>Costs.....</i>	<i>12</i>
Appendix 1: Rhododendron infestation survey and proposed control area by townland	13
Appendix 2: Map of proposed restoration site showing parcel boundaries	14
Appendix 3: List of proposed measures for each parcel	15
Appendix 4: Overview of Natura Communities initiative	16
<i>History and evolution</i>	<i>16</i>

Background

This Call for Tender (CfT) seeks the provision of services to implement measures as part of a multi-actor, community-embedded ecosystem restoration programme. Building on pilot projects (2021–2025) in Galway, Mayo and Donegal, the contractor will focus on building local capacity to address pressures and threats to peatland habitats including the control of invasive species such as *Rhododendron ponticum* within the south Kerry region. Constructive engagement with farmers and landowners is a crucial element of this contract. The contract start date is expected to be in August 2026 and is for an initial period of 12 months with the potential for two further one-year extensions, subject to funding availability.

Scope of work and deliverables

The successful contractor will be responsible for delivering the following core pillars:

- **Stakeholder engagement & capacity building:** Lead extensive formal and informal engagement to include landowners, local authorities, NPWS and ACRES Co-Operation Project (CP) teams. This includes informing and engaging landowners, managing expressions of interest (EOIs) for peatland restoration, collaborating on a training programme for restoration methods, and upskilling personnel (including farmers) in the implementation of restoration actions, as appropriate.
- **Surveying & mapping:** Complete mapping of threats (invasive species, drainage, bare peat) across unmapped areas of c. 2300 ha within an agreed target area of the Caragh river catchment within the Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC (000365) before 30th November 2026 (see Appendix 1). This data will help inform the implementation phase of invasive species control at this target site, Site Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) and the proposed Blanket Bog Provisional Restoration Requirements (PRRs). PRRs are a new NPWS approach to identifying and prioritising areas with the highest restoration potential.
- **Invasive species management:** Implement *Rhododendron* control across c. 200ha of lands surveyed for the control of *Rhododendron ponticum* within the Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC (000365).
- **Peatland restoration implementation:** Implement the advised peatland restoration measures for an approved site-specific restoration plan near Glencar (c. 122ha) that will be provided to the successful contractor. (See Appendix 2 and 3)
- **Peatland restoration planning:** With engagement and in collaboration with local stakeholders such as farmers, landowners, ACRES CP teams, farm advisors or others, the contractor will engage a hydro-ecologist or other suitably qualified person to develop two site-specific restoration plans covering c. 250 ha of blanket bog and associated peatland habitats. It is envisaged that these plans will be implemented by the Natura Community group in a subsequent year.
- **Communication, dissemination and networking:** The successful tenderer will share information and findings from the project and engage in knowledge exchange with relevant stakeholders including other Natura Communities projects, Local Authorities, NPWS, and others.

Call for Tender

This Call for Tender (CFT) invites proposals from qualified contractors to further develop a multi-actor, community-led ecosystem restoration project, which is building on successful preliminary projects across Donegal, Mayo, and Galway (refer to Appendix 2). Building on the foundational work established between 2021 and 2025 (referred to in Appendix 4 and www.naturacommunities.ie), this contract focuses on scaling local capacity to execute restoration actions including *Rhododendron ponticum* control and broader peatland restoration. All actions must align with Site Specific Conservation Objectives (SSCOs) of the target Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and address identified environmental pressures within the target areas.

The successful tenderer will be responsible for:

- Convening and facilitating a Project Steering Group comprising relevant stakeholders and technical advisors.
- Appointing a dedicated Project Coordinator to manage the development and implementation of the Conservation Measures programme.
- Providing the required personnel to cover comprehensive technical and administrative support, including site manager, specialist ecological advice on *Rhododendron* management, GIS mapping, and the provision of all necessary training materials and equipment.
- Maintaining continuous engagement with local landowners and community actors to ensure transparency and maximise participation.

Tasks

Task 1: Project administration and governance

1. **Project office:** Appointment of a Project Coordinator and establishment of the Steering Group.
2. **Funding oversight:** Establish a protocol to prevent double funding, including a mapped funding conflict check against other local initiatives (e.g. ACRES, Coillte or IFI works).

Deliverables and timeline:

- Meeting minutes of Steering Group (ongoing)
- Protocol for prevention of double funding (September 2026)

Task 2: Community and stakeholder engagement

1. **Engagement strategy:** Identify and categorize all relevant actors (landowners, Local Authorities, NPWS, LAWPRO, etc.). Develop an engagement plan including the organisation of a series of formal/informal landowner meetings for each SAC. This should outline the engagement process from initial meeting through to the potential pathways for a farmer or landowner.
2. **Developing a record of interest in peatland restoration:** Provide opportunities for farmers and landowners to become involved in peatland restoration. This should include the development of an inventory of those farmers & landowners interested in implementing peatland restoration on their lands, potentially via a call of EOIs. The information gathered from the EOIs may be used, *inter alia*, to: 1) investigate the potential for peatland restoration on farmers' lands, and provide advice on the implementation of restoration on those lands; 2) facilitate farmers' participation at training, and; 3) identify and prioritise

areas for the implementation of peatland restoration in line with the scope of this CfT (as per Task 7) and/or NPWS prioritisation criteria.

3. **Natura Communities:** Integrate with and promote the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature 'Natura Communities' initiative.

Deliverables and timeline:

- **Engagement plan:** The development of a comprehensive engagement strategy should provide information on the opportunities and benefits of peatland restoration through provision of information, consultation and engagement with all relevant stakeholders, but in particular farmers and landowners of designated lands within the named SACs. The engagement strategy should demonstrate a collaborative pathway, which can be used as a template, for the delivery of peatland restoration for designated lands on both privately owned and commonage lands.

The engagement plan should detail specific phases including: i) information phase through the development of accessible information and materials about peatland restoration, local public awareness campaign; ii) consultation phase through meetings and presentations, surveys, and focus groups (e.g. commonage shareholders); and iii) engagement/demonstration phase to include onsite open days to view existing peatland restoration measures *in situ* that may be linked to training element in Task 5 for practical experience in peatland restoration.

This deliverable should be in the form of an information package including, for example, illustrated information leaflet/booklet, promotional materials, EOI forms, etc. (Submission: December 2026)

- **Stakeholder consultation log:** A final list of those consulted including the level of consultation for project audit purposes. This should include the total number of stakeholders involved, in what capacity, etc. (Submission: December 2026)
- **Communication and dissemination record:** A log of all communication and dissemination activities related to the contract. (Submission: May 2027)

Task 3: Regulatory compliance and consents

1. **Ecological assessments:** Provide Screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA) for all proposed works where appropriate.
2. **Obtain all other consents:** Secure all necessary permissions from landowners and any other relevant statutory bodies (e.g. NPWS/DAFM) prior to operations on the ground.

Deliverables and timeline:

- Copies of all regulatory and consent reports (Timeline: ongoing)

Task 4: Surveying, mapping and planning

1. **Field Surveys:** Using the services of a suitably qualified ecologist (*i.e.* a member of CIEEM) map the occurrence of *Rhododendron ponticum*, habitat type and peatland habitat pressures (predominantly high-level observations using, for example remote sensing: bare peat, drains, other invasive species) across unmapped areas of the targeted lands in the Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC. The proposed survey area extends to c. 2300ha (See appendix 1). Methodology for mapping the occurrence of *Rhododendron ponticum* must follow Higgins' (2008) 5-point infestation scale and habitat mapping should be in line with Fossitt (2000) classification.

2. **GIS Deliverables:** Deliver digitized GIS layers in NPWS-compatible formats (please refer to NPWS GIS standards).
3. **Draft Action Plan:** Create a prioritised implementation timeline for the treatment of *Rhododendron ponticum* across the target areas.

Deliverables and timelines

- See outputs from Task 8.

Task 5: Training & capacity building for farmers and operatives (where required)

1. **Operatives:** Design, deliver and coordinate a training programme based on national good-practice guidance. Coordinate certified training for local operatives (chainsaw/herbicide use, PPE, and manual handling).
2. **Farmers/landowners:** Design, deliver and coordinate training focusing on peatland restoration techniques, based on national good-practice guidance (Two demonstration days).

Deliverables and timelines

- Develop peatland restoration training programme: Provide a report of the review of the proposed training plan and specification for training. (Submission: November 2026)
- Training records including, where appropriate, course title, dates, names, locations relevant to training (Completion: February 2027)

Task 6: Implementation of Rhododendron control and maintenance works

1. **Primary Treatment:** Deliver Rhododendron clearance within a prioritised predefined area of c. 200ha as directed by the draft action plan delivered in Task 4. Areas affected by slight or moderate infestation to be prioritised. All treatment works must be carried out in line with Higgins, G.T. (2008) *Rhododendron ponticum*: A guide to management on nature conservation sites. *Irish Wildlife Manuals*, No. 33. National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Dublin, Ireland.
2. **Monitoring:** Establish a post-treatment monitoring protocol to track regrowth and soil recovery.

Deliverables and timelines

- See outputs from Task 9.

Task 7: Implementation of peatland restoration and erosion measures (Killarney National Park, Macgillicuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC)

1. The contractor will implement an approved restoration plan through appropriate peatland restoration and erosion control measures as presented in Appendix 2 and 3, across approximately 122ha within the Killarney National Park, Macgillicuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC. The information on this site will be provided to the successful contractor. The contractor will be responsible for all materials, labour and associated costs of the implementation phase.

2. All works must follow the Restoration Action Plan (RAP) and adhere to best-practice guidelines, such as those developed by NatureScot Peatland Action, and when available, the NPWS guidelines.
3. Implementation must be conducted in close consultation with LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).
4. The successful contractor will be responsible for ensuring a landowner agreement is in place (between NPWS and landowner) before any works begin. Where relevant, a training & collaboration payment may be made to the landowner(s) following the terms and conditions of, and in strict consultation with, LIFE IP WAN. Tenderers should include an indicative sum of €30,000 in the tender. The proposed approach should be clearly outlined in the tender.

Deliverables and timelines

- Completion of peatland restoration and erosion measures: A final summary report on all actions taken within the Killarney National Park, Macgillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment SAC. (Completion: April 2027)
- GIS output of completed restoration areas: Verification that all data is compatible with NPWS and all measures are compatible to NatureScot or equivalent NPWS standards. (Submission: June 2027)

Task 8: Development of the Natura Communities approach and future planning

1. The contractor will engage with landowners and key stakeholders (e.g., ACRES CP teams, NGO groups, and EIP projects) to identify approximately 250ha where blanket bog is the dominant habitat, ideally across 2 or more sites. The identification of sites should be informed by activities undertaken in Task 2.
2. In collaboration with landowners and relevant agencies, the contractor will develop Site-Specific Restoration Action Plans (RAPs) for these newly identified areas. This should comprise of close collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.

Deliverables and timeline

- Identification of sites: Presentation of areas identified and mapped within the specified SACs. (Completion: December 2026)
- Site selection approval: Review of summary reports and Restoration Action Plans for the selected sites. (Completion: February 2027)
- GIS output in relation to RAP of planned restoration area. Verification that all data is compatible with NPWS and all measures are compatible to good practice standards. (Submission: February 2027)

Task 9: Data management, reporting, and educational outputs

- **1. Administrative & progress reporting**
These reports ensure the project remains on schedule and compliant with public procurement and funding obligations.
 - Bi-weekly project update and monthly progress report: A brief progress report meeting between the project coordinator and LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and monthly reports detailing progress against milestones, stakeholder meetings held, any emerging risks, etc.

- Annual progress report: A comprehensive end-of-year summary detailing all activities completed within the calendar year. This must include a financial statement and a declaration verifying the avoidance of double funding from other state agencies.
- Final project report (June 2027): A definitive document covering Tasks 1 – 8, including an evaluation of the pilot elements and strategic recommendations for future scaling across the southwest of Ireland.
- **2. Ecological and technical reporting**
These reports document the scientific success and regulatory compliance of the restoration efforts.
 - Baseline survey & mapping report: Following Task 4, a detailed report on the maturity, density, and growth form of *Rhododendron ponticum*, including Fossitt (2000) habitat classifications for all target areas.
 - Restoration Action Plans (RAPs): Technical plans for the newly identified sites (c.250 ha), developed in consultation with hydro-ecologists or appropriate expert, landowner and adhering to appropriate standards.
 - Habitats Directive Assessments: Screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA) reports for all physical works, ensuring no adverse effects on the integrity of the SACs.
 - Monitoring & impact report: A specific report detailing the recovery of native flora and soil health in cleared areas, contributing to Ireland's Article 17 reporting on the conservation status of habitats.
- **3. Spatial Data Deliverables (GIS)**
Data must be delivered in professional digital formats to be integrated into national environmental databases.
 - NPWS-standard GIS Datasets: All mapping (infestation levels, habitat types, drains) must be submitted as shape files in the Irish Transverse Mercator (ITM) projection, following the [NPWS Project Data Standards](#).
 - Species Records: Individual sightings of flora or fauna recorded during field surveys must be submitted to the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) or via the NPWS species record template.
- **4. Training and outreach**
To fulfil the "capacity building" goals of the tender, the contractor must produce public-facing materials.
 - Training completion records: A log of all community members trained, their certification levels (e.g., chainsaw/herbicide), and feedback from the training pilot. This should include the number of type of attendees at various training events, including operatives and farmer trainees.
 - Communication and dissemination record: A log of all communication and dissemination activities related to the contract.

Deliverables and timelines

- Rhododendron and site pressures and threats mapping: Presentation of the initial GIS output and overview report and draft action plan for stakeholder input. (Draft submission: September 2026 and final submission February 2027)
- Rhododendron training: Update on the numbers trained including level of training metric. This provides a continuous measure of community engagement and capacity building: (Ongoing September 2026 to May 2027)

- Rhododendron control progress: Monthly progress update to WAN team, which will include the latest GIS output on all treatment areas: (Ongoing September 2026 to May 2027)
- Annual Report (first draft): (Submission: December, 2026)
- Final project submission: The comprehensive final report, including the summary report, final GIS output, guidance documents, and recommendations for future development of the overall model. (Submission: June 2027)
- Final Natura Communities expansion strategy report detailing potential further work programme. (Submission: January 2027)

Task 10: Provision of costed rate of delivery of works

Provision of proposal for works required in 2027 and 2028 based on the outputs presented in the Tasks above.

Deliverables and timelines

- Comprehensive proposal for programme of restoration works for implementation in 2027 & 2028: (Draft submission: November 2026 with final submission in January 2027)

Minimum eligibility requirements

Tenderers must demonstrate that they meet the following minimum requirements. Evidence (e.g. CVs, project references, certifications, GDPR policies) must be provided in the tender submission.

1. Project Management & Administration Capacity (Tasks 1, 9 & 10)

- **Project Coordinator Experience:** The proposed Project Coordinator should have a minimum of 3 years of experience managing multi-stakeholder environmental or community-based projects of similar scale in a rural Irish context.
- **Data Management & IT Infrastructure:** The tenderer must possess proven facilities and expertise for securely handling data (GDPR compliant) and process spatial data in line with NPWS Project Data Standards.
- **Financial Management:** The tenderer must provide evidence of internal financial controls capable of tracking and reporting on funding from various sources to avoid double funding conflicts.

2. Community Engagement Expertise (Tasks 2 & 8)

- **Stakeholder Liaison Experience:** A track record of successful formal and informal engagement with diverse stakeholders, including landowners, farmers, state agencies (NPWS, IFI, LAs), ACRES CP teams, and local NGOs.
- **Natura Communities Integration:** Proven experience or a clear plan for facilitating and promoting community-led conservation initiatives within the Natura 2000 network in the west of Ireland region.

3. Ecological & Regulatory Compliance Expertise (Tasks 3, 4, 6 and 7)

- **Qualified Ecologists:** The core project team must include the services of at least one Certified Ecologist (e.g. CIEEM member) with experience in Irish habitat classification (Fossitt 2000).

- **Habitats Directive Compliance:** Demonstrable experience in performing screenings for Appropriate Assessment (AA) in line with the EU Habitats Directive for proposed restoration and invasive species clearance works within SACs.
- **Peatland Restoration Expertise:** The successful tenderer must demonstrate the availability of services to deliver peatland restoration planning and capacity to implement best-practice peatland restoration measures, ideally referencing guidelines from recognized bodies like NatureScot Peatland Action.
- **Invasive Species Management:** Proven expertise in the management and disposal of invasive non-native species, specifically *Rhododendron ponticum*, compliant with Irish environmental legislation.

4. Training & Fieldwork Capacity (Tasks 5, 6, and 7)

- **Training Accreditations:** The tenderer must have the capacity to provide/coordinate certified training (e.g., chainsaw use, herbicide application, H&S requirements) to local operatives.
- **GIS and Mapping Capacity:** The team must be proficient in using GIS software for detailed mapping of species density, habitat types, and pressures at a suitable scale for action plan development.
- **Physical Works Capacity:** The tenderer must demonstrate they have access to sufficient expertise and labour to conduct physical *Rhododendron* control and subsequent retreatment across the specified target areas in a timely manner.

General requirements in response to this CFT

Tenderers must include the following:

- Project planning and proposed plan for delivering tasks including methodology and timelines.
- Details on the range of stakeholders involved, number and nature of proposed meetings, e.g. farm visits, stakeholder meeting etc.
- Detailed budget required for stakeholder meetings, training and capacity building, and for implementation of restoration actions including materials, labour and machinery.
- Details of interoperability with ACRES CP, and any other relevant programmes, including the potential risks of double funding.
- Price to be quoted net of VAT but inclusive of all associated costs and expenses.
- VAT rate if applicable. If VAT exempt supporting documentation must be provided.
- Provide examples of previous relevant experience and references where appropriate.
- CVs of those leading the project.
- Schedule of work (*i.e.* days per person).
- Detailed deliverables and associated payment schedule. This should ideally be in the form of a table that clearly illustrates the milestones of payments in relation to tasks outlined above.

Indicative budget

The estimated budget for this contract is €565,000 excluding VAT.

Table 2 (below) gives an indicative cost per hectare for treatment of *Rhododendron ponticum* at different infestation levels.

Table 2: Indicative costs per hectare at different levels of infestation

Infestation Level	Costs per Hectare * (€)
Slight	210
Moderate	600
Severe	3,000
Very Severe	15,000

*Note costs per hectare are indicative only

Payments, contractual liaison

Payments will be dependent on deliverables being satisfactorily received and clearly identified in any payment request. A proposed payment schedule including a payment timeline and expected achieved deliverables should be provided in the tender (please see below). Final deliverables are due by April 2027, but several aspects of the contract will be produced and finalised in sequence in advance of this. All contractual liaisons will be with Derek McLoughlin of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature NPWS or another nominated project team member.

Example of requested payment schedule:

<i>Proposed Invoice date</i>	<i>Achieved deliverable</i>	<i>Proposed completion date</i>	<i>Cost (exc. VAT)</i>
<i>31/01/2024</i>	<i>10ha of rhodo control site code: LRP999</i>	<i>15/01/2024</i>	<i>€10,000</i>
<i>28/02/2024</i>	<i>50 peat dams Site code: LRP998 2ha of rhodo control Site code: LRP997</i>	<i>28/02/2024</i>	<i>€5,750</i>

Award Criteria

The Services Contract will be awarded on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender. This will be evaluated based on the following:

- Expertise (30%)
- Proposed methodology (30%)
- Demonstrated experience in providing related services (20%)
- Value for money (20%)

Services Contract

Before the services contract can be awarded, the successful tenderer will be required to supply a Tax Clearance Access Number and Tax Reference Number. It is a condition that the successful tenderer shall, for the term of such contract, comply with all EU and domestic tax laws. Where applicable, relevant payments shall be subject to Irish 'Professional Services Withholding Tax' at the prevailing rate (currently at 20%) as laid down by the Revenue Commissioners in Ireland.

Type of Insurance	Indemnity Limit
Employers liability	€12.7m for any one claim or series of claims arising out of a single occurrence (if self-employed this is not necessary)
Public liability	€6.5m limit for any one claim or series of claims arising out of a single occurrence

Instructions to the Supplier

Costs

All costs and expenses incurred by Tenderers relating to their participation in the procurement competition including, but not being limited to, site visits, field trails, demonstration and/or presentation shall be borne by and are a matter for discharge by the Tenderers exclusively.

All prices quoted must be all-inclusive (i.e. including but not being limited to all cost/expenses/indexation), be expressed in Euro only and exclusive of VAT. The VAT rate(s) where applicable should be indicated separately.

Tenderers must confirm that all prices quoted in the Tender will remain valid for 3 months commencing from the closing date for the receipt of quotations.

The contract will be awarded on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender.

Appendix 1: Rhododendron infestation survey and proposed control area by townland

The townlands listed below represent the scope of the proposed rhododendron survey and control programme. Note that the measures listed in tasks 4 and 6 may only be carried out on portions of these areas, contingent upon securing necessary landowner agreements.

Townlands Within Caragh_SC_010	Hectares
Commaun	224.93
Callahaniska	159.59
Treanmanagh	242.62
Cosha North	88.12
Treangarriv	228.89
Bunglasha North	100.94
Drom East	54.57
Lickeen	230.54
Cappyantanvally	129.66
Gortnagan More	61.13
Gortnagan Beg	63.64
Oolagh West	286.16
Oolagh East	436.32



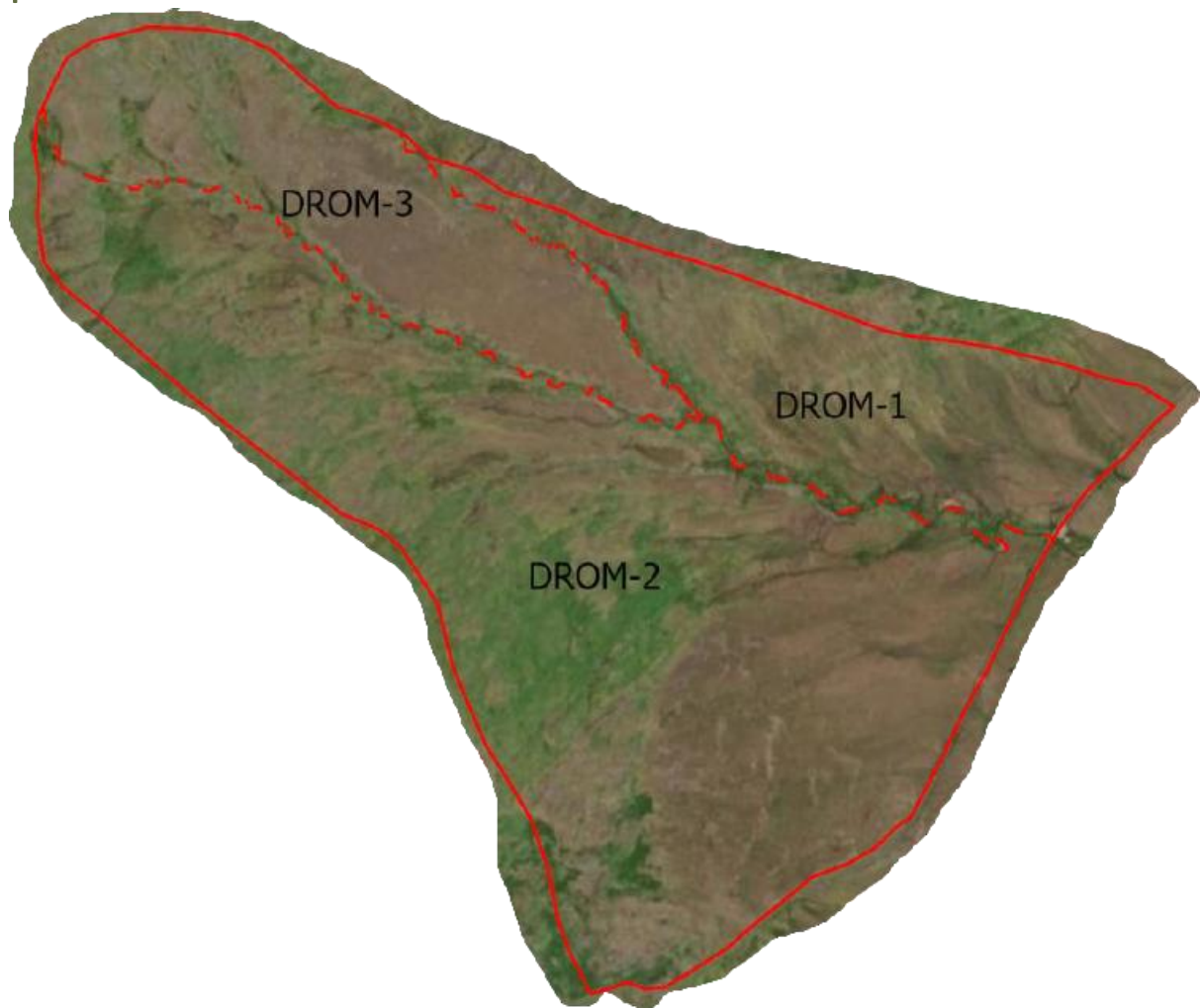
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Appendix 2: Map of proposed restoration site showing parcel boundaries



Appendix 3: List of proposed measures for each parcel

DROM-1	Units	Quantity
Area	ha	22.1
Coir log (2m)	no.	87
Geotextile (ground)	m ²	620
Geotextile (matting)	m ²	11
Timber dam	no.	5
Reprofiling	m	410
Temporary exclosure fence (mountain sheep)	m	517
DROM-2	Units	Quantity
Area	ha	77.7
Coir log (2m)	no.	373
Geotextile (ground)	m ²	620
Geotextile (matting)	m ²	299
Timber dam	no.	65
Temporary exclosure fence (mountain sheep)	m	989
DROM-3	Units	Quantity
Area	ha	21.8
Coir log (2m)	no.	84
Geotextile (ground)	m ²	160
Geotextile (matting)	m ²	10

Appendix 4: Overview of Natura Communities initiative

Natura Communities is a locally embedded nature conservation programme, guided by national policies on biodiversity, climate, and water.

Natura Communities builds capacity for local communities to deliver restoration projects, and provides a framework for an integrated approach to sustainable landscape management. The ultimate goal is to improve the conservation status in the Natura 2000 network, including Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs). By directly investing in communities within and adjacent to Natura 2000 sites, Natura Communities supports long-term conservation, where experience and expertise is developed and retained within local areas. Building capacity to engage in this type of work has two broad benefits; it delivers social benefits for people in these areas (e.g. through job creation) whilst improving the ecological quality and resilience of protected habitats.

Policy driven

- Birds and Habitats Directive
- National Biodiversity Action Plan
- Nature Restoration Regulation
- Common Agricultural Policy
- Water Framework Directive
- Climate Action Plan



Locally embedded

- Creating local employment
- Building knowledge and skills
- Raising awareness and education
- Engaging local stakeholders
- Sensitive to land management
- Meeting policy objectives

The essential elements for the successful delivery of a Natura Communities project include:

- Building the capacity for local communities across all levels of land restoration management
- Building and maintaining positive relationships with local communities and key stakeholders
- Supporting local communities to be effective and informed custodians of the land
- Retaining economic benefits in local areas
- Flexible employment with continuous professional development opportunities
- Ensuring compliance with regulations in policy and practice
- Adhering to good practice in restoration and monitoring techniques
- Standardisation in financial and technical reporting
- Partnership with external providers to enhance service delivery and fill gaps

History and evolution

Restoration in Ireland has traditionally been implemented through direct payments to landowners, such as in the case of agri-environment schemes (AES), or via specialist contractors, who are often employed to deliver once-off or *ad hoc* projects. In both cases, projects are usually short-term, with little or no support for long-term management and maintenance. Moreover, skills and capacity developed within short-term projects are often lost across space and time. For example, where contractors come in from outside the geographic area and leave once the project finishes. In many cases, farmers, landowners and local communities do not have the time, expertise or resources required to undertake restoration work, even where the willingness is there. The problem is compounded for landscape level conservation, which requires coordination across multiple stakeholders.

It is within this context that Natura Communities evolved with the first pilot project in the Bundorragha catchment, Delphi, Co. Mayo. The project was conceived in 2022 in response to demand from farmers whose (results-based) agri-environment payments were affected by the presence of the invasive plant *Rhododendron ponticum*. Leenane Development Association secured funding from LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, with a remit to develop and test a community-led model for invasive species control. Tasks included stakeholder engagement, mapping threats and pressures, and training local farmers to treat *Rhododendron ponticum* on their own land across the Bundorragha catchment, following best practice methods. It quickly became apparent that, while interest from farmers was high, not all farmers had the time or physical capacity to undertake the work. Instead, alternative locally-based labour was secured and new recruits were trained and equipped to control invasive species. The project was a general success, although the voluntary community development group found the administrative burden prohibitive.

The pilot was expanded in 2023, with the Local Development Company, FORUM Connemara, taking on the coordination role under the title Dúlra. Crucially, FORUM Connemara brought expertise in project management, administration and financial control. They also have significant experience in running various rural development and community-based initiatives. The technical scope of the pilot expanded to include other peatland restoration actions including erosion control, water table management and reprofiling. As well as delivering Natura Communities contracts, Dúlra were successful in securing public and private contracts for other restoration works in their area. They currently employ more than 20 people in Connemara and South Mayo, with the model proving extremely effective in generating local buy-in from landowners, as well as excellent value for money in service delivery.

In 2024, the Natura Communities programme was scaled out to two additional regions. Cairde na hEragaile CLG were the successful contractor in Donegal and Mayo North East LEADER Partnership in north Mayo, through their Atlantic West Community Alliance subsidiary. Knowledge exchange between the three groups has been key to the successful expansion of the programme. Importantly, local communities in these regions are starting to view Natura 2000 sites as an economic resource, providing employment and training opportunities in otherwise economically disadvantaged areas.