

APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT SCREENING REPORT

**Determination of the need for an Appropriate Assessment for 'Ag
Climatise' – A Roadmap towards Climate Neutrality**

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1. Introduction

The global community faces a future in which we need to balance the need to increase food and fibre production, with helping farmers, foresters, fishermen and society generally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), build resilience and adapt to the impact of climate change.

The Programme for Government, and the recently published Climate Action Amendment Bill 2020, set out the objective to achieve a ‘**climate neutral economy**’ which balances emissions and removals within the State, by the end of 2050 and in subsequent years.

Under the Paris Agreement, Ireland and other countries have committed to limiting temperature rise to less than 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit temperature rise to less than 1.5 degrees.

As a member of the EU, Ireland’s target to reduce emissions in line with the Paris Agreement goals is guided by the EU Climate and Energy Framework. The EU Commission recently announced its new European Green Deal agenda, including a Farm to Fork strategy and Biodiversity strategy. It is clear that at a whole of economy level, environmental ambition must be stepped up to meet the recently increased EU target of 55% reduction in emissions by 2030. Agriculture will have to play its part.

In practical terms, this means:

- reducing CO₂ to zero as soon as feasible,
- declining non -CO₂ emissions and
- enhancing CO₂ removals to balance historic CO₂ emissions and residual non CO₂ emissions.

The National Emission Ceilings Directive establishes limit values for five air pollutants to help mitigate their impact on Member State populations. Upon exceedance of these limit values, Member States must implement air quality plans to assess and combat the problem.

One of these air pollutants is ammonia, and it comes almost exclusively from the agri-food sector. Under the National Emissions Ceiling Directive, Ireland has an ammonia target of 107,500 tonnes in 2030. The most recent EPA Air Quality report (June 2020) indicated that there were 119,339 tonnes of ammonia produced in 2018.

While the primary focus of the Ag-Climatise roadmap is on GHG and ammonia emissions, it is clear that achieving our 2030 targets for climate and air will also have positive co-benefits for water quality and biodiversity.

2. Appropriate Assessment Screening Process

Appropriate Assessment (AA) may be required under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive (EC, Habitats Directive), which states that: “Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to an appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site’s conservation objectives¹.”

A four stage approach is taken to AA², the first of which is screening. Screening determines whether AA is necessary by examining:

- whether a plan or project can be excluded from AA requirements because it is directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site, and

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043&from=EN>

² https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS_2009_AA_Guidance.pdf

- the potential effects of a project or plan, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans, on a Natura 2000 site in view of its conservation objectives, and considering whether these effects will be significant.

The guidelines state that screening is an iterative process which involves consideration of the plan or project and its likely effects, and of the Natura 2000 sites and their ecological sensitivities and the likely interaction between these. The screening process should include the following:

1. A description of the plan or project and local site or plan area characteristics
2. Identification of relevant Natura 2000 sites, and compilation of information on their qualifying interests and conservation objectives
3. Assessment of likely effects – direct, indirect and cumulative – undertaken on the basis of available information as a desk study or field survey or primary research as necessary
4. Screening statement with conclusions.

3. Description of the Plan

‘Ag Climatise’ is a roadmap designed to help all stakeholders to work together to tackle climate change and air pollution, by clearly explaining what we need to do and when we need to do it by. By collectively pooling expertise and energy we can determine how best to do it, ensuring our sector remains at the forefront of globally sustainable food production systems. The roadmap comprises both changes which need to be made now and cross cutting enabling actions which need to be made into the future.

The roadmap identifies six key things that need to do be done to meet climate and environmental objectives, while maintaining viable farm incomes in the sector.

1. Reduce GHG emissions from the sector. Methane from enteric fermentation and nitrous oxide from fertiliser use are the dominant greenhouse gases from agriculture.
2. Increase the carbon sequestration and carbon storage potential of Ireland’s land use sector.
3. Reduce nutrient loss and contribute to improved water quality and biodiversity.
4. Meet ammonia emissions reduction targets.
5. Build sustainable, resilient food production and land use management systems that meet these climate and environmental obligations, while also meeting market expectations.
6. Transparently communicate progress; the Origin Green programme can play a key role in this regard.

The roadmap is based on stabilising methane emissions and a significant reduction in fertiliser related nitrous oxide emissions, leading to an absolute reduction in the agricultural greenhouse inventory by 2030. Any increase in biogenic methane emissions from continually increasing livestock numbers will put the achievement of this target in doubt.

In order to respond to the challenge in a coherent and coordinated manner, this roadmap can guide the development of an agri-food sector that is built on environmental sustainability and climate resilience, and contributes fairly to Ireland’s climate, air and energy targets.

Many of the actions referenced in this roadmap are based on the Teagasc Marginal Abatement Cost Curves (MACC) for GHG and ammonia and can be acted on immediately. Other actions will need further consideration, and in collaboration with stakeholders, we will establish expert groups to oversee the development and implementation of actions where a path to delivery is unclear.

The roadmap provides the structure for the future development of the sector. It is envisaged that the details and operationalisation of actions will be set out in the various policies, strategies, plans and measures developed within the sector. Each of these national policies, strategies, plans and measures will, where appropriate, be subject to screening for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and/or screening for Appropriate Assessment (AA). Depending on the outcome of screening processes these policies, strategies, plans and measures may continue to full SEA and AA, as appropriate.

4. Identification of relevant Natura 2000 sites

The EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) placed an obligation on Member States of the EU to establish the Natura 2000 network of important ecological sites³. The network is made up of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

Ireland has a higher density of Natura 2000 sites in Galway, Donegal and Mayo where habitats such as blanket bogs, semi-natural grasslands and high-quality water dependent habitats are located. Natura 2000 sites are concentrated along major river catchments in Carlow and along the coast in Wicklow and Waterford and in the south east of Ireland. Agriculture and forest sector activities take place within, and in the areas surrounding, Natura 2000 sites as agriculture and forest undertakings are intrinsically linked with the resources and biodiversity provided by these areas. Ruminant production, which is the mainstream of Irish agriculture, is very much based on sustainability principles. Some 90 per cent of the diet of dairy and beef animals is composed of grass or silage that is grown on farm in permanent pastures on which the livestock are reared. Similarly, the entire west coast is dominated by Natura 2000 sites as coastal waters and estuaries are as equally important to seafood in terms of resources and biodiversity. The majority of Natura 2000 sites are identified as relevant in this instance.

5. Assessment of likely effects

The purpose of the roadmap is to ensure that the future development of the agriculture and land use (including forest) sector will be built upon environmental sustainability and contribute fairly to Ireland's climate, air and energy targets, ensuring alignment with the Paris agreement, however, the document will not set out projects or specifically propose measures.

Section 4.3.2 of the European Commission document on managing Natura 2000 sites, *The Provisions of Article 6 of the 'Habitats' Directive 92/43/EEC*⁴ states that it does not seem appropriate to treat policy documents, which show the general political will or intention of a ministry or lower authority as 'plans' for the purpose of Article 6(3). The section further notes that this is particularly relevant if

³ <https://www.npws.ie/protected-sites>

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/art6/provision_of_art6_en.pdf

any initiatives deriving from such policy statements must pass through the intermediary of a land-use or sectoral plan.

The roadmap will inform other future plans as its main output is to ensure that all policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to, agriculture and forest must be informed of the actions necessary to protect the environment and address climate change. However, individual policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to, agriculture and forest must be considered under the SEA and, where appropriate, the AA process.

6. Conclusions

It is concluded that a full Appropriate Assessment of 'Ag Climatise' Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector is not required because, as stated in section 5, it is not possible to carry out an assessment of the likely effects of the roadmap on Natura 2000 sites as the purpose of the roadmap is to inform DAFM policy of the actions necessary to protect the environment and address climate change, and not to set out projects or propose specific measures.

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