

# **APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT SCREENING REPORT**

**Determination of the need for an Appropriate Assessment for  
National Horticulture Strategy 2023-2027**

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## 1. Introduction

The horticulture sector is the fourth largest sector in agriculture in Ireland and makes a significant contribution to the economy with a farm gate value of almost €521 million in 2021. An estimated 17,600 people are employed in the sector at both primary level and value added downstream.

Some 6,600 are employed in the Horticulture industry directly, including the ornamental (bulbs, nurseries, landscape, bedding plants etc.) sector, salad crops, vegetable and soft/top fruit sectors, while a further 11,000 are employed in downstream businesses.

Food Vision 2030 recognised the opportunity potential of the domestic horticulture sector and identified the need for a road map for the horticulture sector to 2030. This road map will be in the form of a horticulture strategy which will aim to address the challenges and opportunities for sustaining and growing the sector.

The ambition of the strategy is to use it as a tool to grow a more profitable value-added sector driven by sustainability and innovation. This ambition is aligned with Food Vision 2030 and the three pillars of sustainability, which are environmental, economic and social, these three pillars underpin the horticulture strategy.

In the *Climate Action Plan for 2021* a specific action was identified for horticulture and the horticulture strategy will aim to address this action (330 Identify knowledge gaps in the horticulture sector around climate change mitigation actions and address areas for change). The horticulture sector is often acknowledged as being one of the most carbon efficient sectors, however verifying data to substantiate this claim need to be produced and this will be covered under the implementation of this new strategy.

While the focus of the horticulture as mentioned above is to address the challenges and opportunities for sustaining and growing the sector this will be intrinsically linked to achieving environmental sustainability too.

## 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 objectives<sup>1</sup>.”

A four-stage approach is taken to AA<sup>2</sup>, 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

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

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS\\_2009\\_AA\\_Guidance.pdf](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**

The National Horticulture Strategy will help all stakeholders to work together to ensure the long term economic, social and environmental sustainability of the sector, by putting in place a series of targeted actions and a clear and achievable implementation plan. By collectively pooling expertise and energy we can determine how best to do it, ensuring this sector remains at the forefront of globally sustainable food production systems. The strategy comprises both Key Strategic Actions (KSAs) which need to be progressed now and KSAs which need to be progressed into the future.

The strategy that needs to be produced must be able to meet climate and environmental objectives, while maintaining viable farm incomes in the sector.

The National Horticulture Strategy provides the structure for the future development of the sector. The details and operationalisation of KSAs will be set out in this Strategy and will require relevant stakeholder engagement to progress as identified in this strategy. Additional national policies, strategies, plans and measures may be required.

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 sites<sup>3</sup>. 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. Horticulture activities may take place within, and in the areas surrounding, Natura 2000 sites as horticultural undertakings can be intrinsically linked with the resources and biodiversity provided by these areas. Production in horticulture is very much based on sustainability principles, and as mentioned in the introduction is it acknowledged that it is a carbon efficient sector, with most producers using innovative technologies to limit environmental impact and make the most efficient use of resources.

#### 5. Assessment of likely effects

The purpose of the National Horticulture Strategy is to ensure that the future development of the horticulture to grow a more profitable value-added sector driven by sustainability and innovation. This ambition is aligned with Food Vision 2030 and the three pillars of sustainability, which are environmental, economic and social, these three pillars underpin the National Horticulture Strategy. However, the Strategy will not set out projects or specifically propose measures but outline Key Strategic Actions and the outcomes that may be achieved.

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*<sup>4</sup> 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

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

<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/management/docs/art6/provision\\_of\\_art6\\_en.pdf](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 National Horticulture Strategy may inform other future plans as its main output is to ensure that all policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to horticulture are committed to the three pillars of sustainability, which are environmental, economic and social, these three pillars underpin the horticulture strategy. However, individual policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to horticulture may need to be considered under the SEA and, where appropriate, the AA process.

## **6. Conclusions**

It is concluded that a full Appropriate Assessment of the National Horticulture Strategy 2023-2027 is not required because, as stated in section 5, it is not possible to carry out an assessment of the likely effects of the Strategy on Natura 2000 sites as the purpose of the Strategy is to inform DAFM policy of the actions necessary to achieve the three pillars of sustainability and how to grow a more profitable value-added sector driven by sustainability and innovation. The Strategy's purpose is not to set out projects or propose specific measures.

The National Horticulture Strategy will inform other future plans as its main output is to ensure that all policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to, horticulture must be informed of the actions concerning environmental sustainability. However, individual policies, strategies, plans and measures for, or related to, horticulture may be considered under the SEA and, where appropriate, the AA process.