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Standard for Good Agricultural & Environmental Condition of Land (GAEC)

GAECs 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6

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Introduction

- GAEC requires land to be kept in good agricultural and environmental condition
- GAEC standards consist of nine standards related to:

Soil	**Protection and maintenance of soil organic matter**
Protection of habitats	**Protection of water sources**

- Council Regulation 2021/2115 - Annex III

The GAEC's under Conditionality

GAEC 1 Maintenance of permanent grassland based on a ratio of permanent grassland in relation to agricultural area **(formally part of BPS Greening).**

GAEC 2 Minimum protection of wetlands and peatlands – **NEW in 2025**

GAEC 3 Ban on burning arable stubble, except for plant health reasons.

GAEC 4 Establishment of buffer strips along water courses.

GAEC 5 Tillage management or other appropriate cultivation techniques to limit the risk of soil degradation.

GAEC 6 Minimum soil cover.

GAEC 7 Crop rotation or other practices aiming at preserving the soil potential, such as crop diversification **(formally part of BPS Greening).**

GAEC 8 Minimum share (4%) of agricultural area devoted to non-productive features **(formally part of BPS Greening)**, retention of landscape features, ban on cutting hedges and trees during the bird breeding and rearing season & measures for avoiding invasive plant species.

GAEC 9 Ban on converting or ploughing permanent grassland in Natura 2000 sites designated as environmentally-sensitive permanent grasslands (ESPG) **(formally part of BPS Greening).**

GAEC 2 – Minimum Protection of Wetlands and Peatlands (New from 2025)

Aim is to address climate change by protecting carbon rich soils of wetlands and peatlands.

BISS claimants with lands intersecting peatlands must meet certain requirements/restrictions in regard to:

- Drainage
- Ploughing

GAEC 2 Area

Defined Area:

- Teagasc-EPA Indicative Soils Map >=30% OM
- Land parcels that contain >=50% peat soils
- Area of GAEC 2 parcels estimated at 650k ha which will include 570k ha of peatland

GAEC 2 Requirements

Drainage

- The maintenance of existing drains is permitted as long as they are not deepened.
- New drainage on applicable lands will require planning permission as is currently the case under national legislation.
- Deepening of existing drains or extension of the drained area beyond what previously existed is considered new drainage.

GAEC 2 Requirements contd.

Ploughing

- Ploughing will only be permitted to a maximum of 30cm on grass and arable land.

- Ploughing for reseeding grassland will be permitted one in every four years.

- Annual ploughing is allowed on arable land.

GAEC 3

Ban on burning arable stubble, except for plant health reasons

AIM: To maintain soil organic matter levels

- Is there evidence of burning of crop residues, such as straw or straw stubble, without prior approval from DAFM?
- Encourages the incorporation of arable stubble into the soil which improves soil organic matter and soil health

GAEC 4

Establishment of buffer strips along watercourses

Aim: To protect all waters against pollution and run-off from the use of fertilisers and pesticides.

- Restrict the cultivation activities and the application and storage of chemical and organic fertilisers along waters and beside wells/boreholes.
  - *Compliance with SMR 2 (Nitrates) buffer limits satisfies this requirement.*

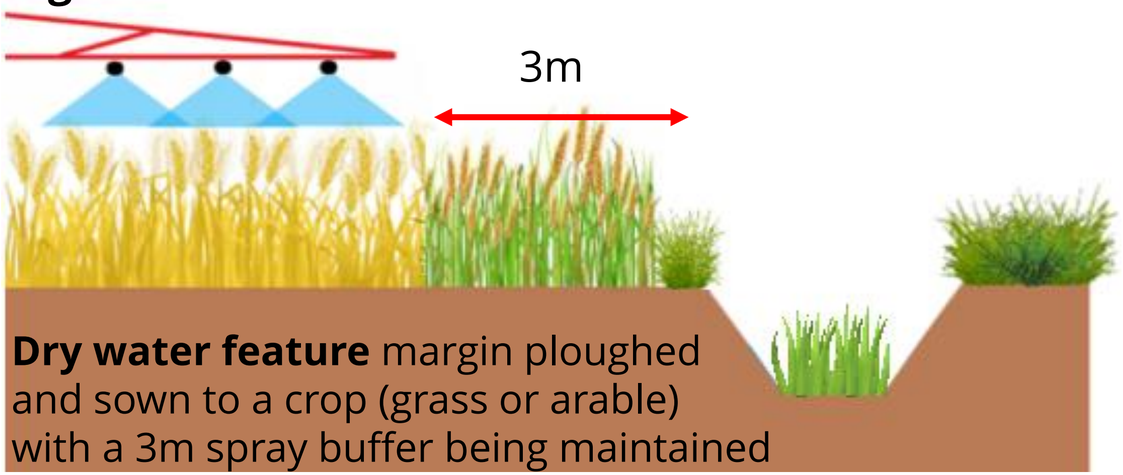
Is a 3m buffer margin being observed in respect of the application of plant protection products along waters?

A 3m unsprayed buffer must be maintained along waters (both permanent waters and dry drains)

Fig 1: **Dry water features** (e.g. land drains which run dry for a period) may be ploughed to within 3m, and sown to a grass or arable crop, however, a 3m buffer must be maintained when spraying

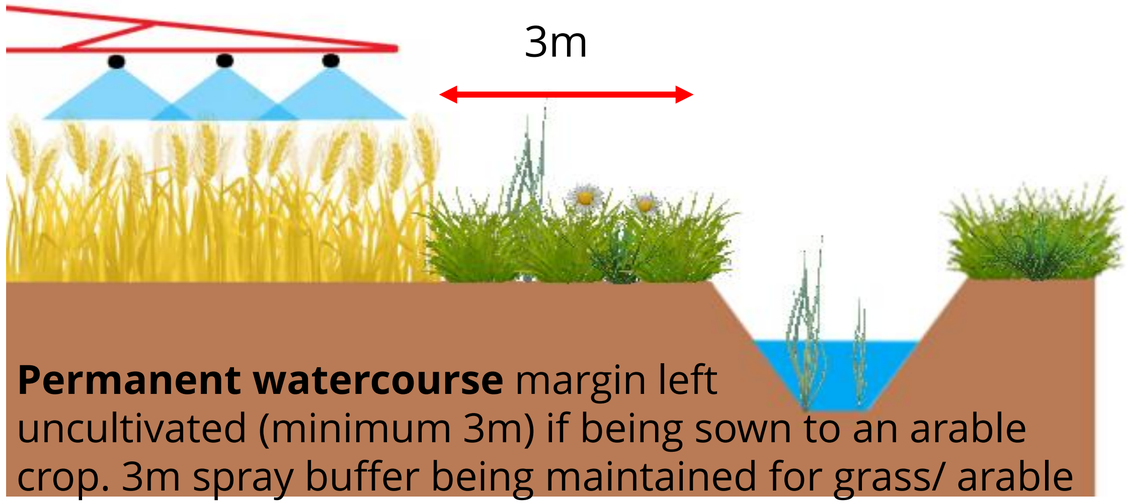
Fig 2: **Permanent watercourses** must <u>not</u> be ploughed, or sown to an arable crop, to within 3m (may be ploughed to within 3m for grassland establishment). A 3m buffer must be maintained when spraying the adjacent grass or arable crop

Fig 1.



Dry water feature margin ploughed and sown to a crop (grass or arable) with a 3m spray buffer being maintained

Fig 2.



Permanent watercourse margin left uncultivated (minimum 3m) if being sown to an arable crop. 3m spray buffer being maintained for grass/ arable

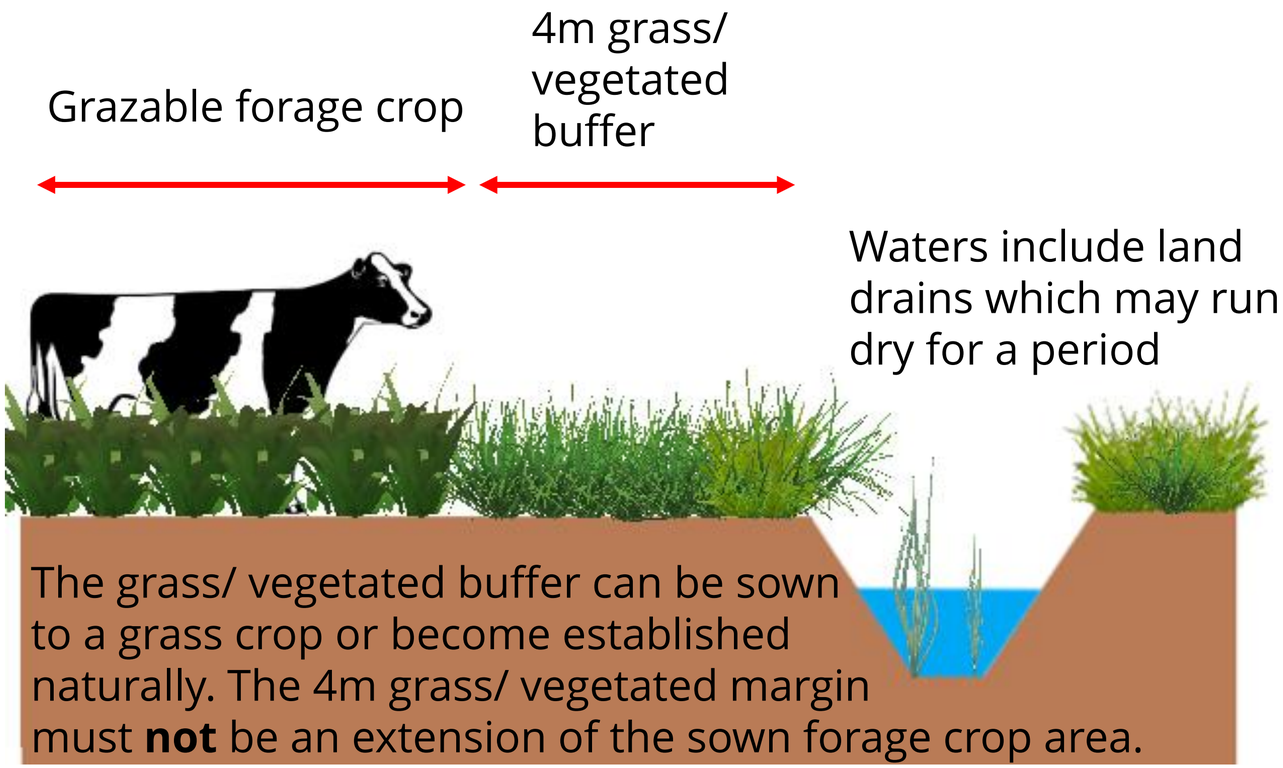
Has a 4m grass/ vegetated buffer margin been provided along waters where non-grass forage crops are being grazed in-situ?

A **4m grass/ vegetated** buffer must be maintained along <u>waters</u> where forage crops are being grazed in-situ

Applies to both **dry water features** (e.g. land drains which may run dry for a period) and **permanent watercourses**

There is no requirement to fence these 4m buffers along permanent watercourses.

However, fencing permanent watercourses to 1.5m from the top of the bank may be required under SMR 2 (GSR >170kg N ha before exports)



GAEC 5

<u>Tillage management</u>, reducing the risk of soil degradation and erosion, including consideration of the slope gradient.

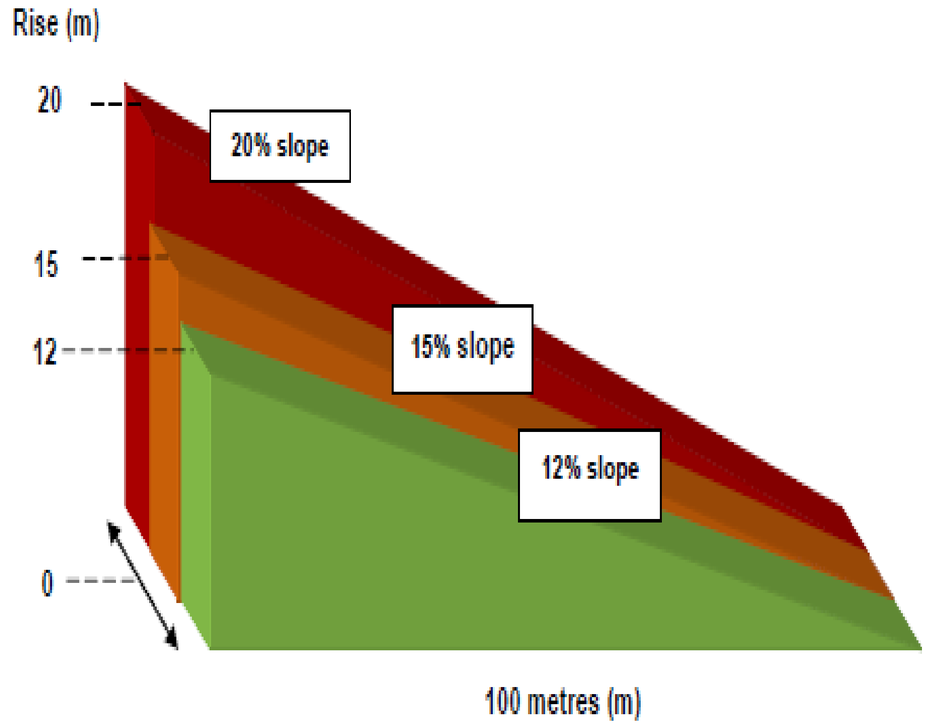
Aim: To protect soil from erosion by ensuring minimum land management and minimum soil cover.

- Ploughing restrictions for grassland and arable land are the same as outlined under SMR 2.
- Avoid leaving land bare and without any cover on the soil for prolonged periods of time (max. of 4 months).

GAEC 5

Restrictions on the ploughing of arable land with a slope of 15% or more and grassland with a slope of 20% or more

- These lands cannot be ploughed between 1st December and 31st December.
- Effectively this requirement is delaying ploughing by one month where there is sloping ground



GAEC 5

- Are there any other activities likely to cause soil degradation or erosion, e.g., inappropriate use of machinery, poor cropping practices and crop structures, finely tilled soils not in the process of crop establishment

Most common: The use of heavy machinery when the soil is saturated can damage

GAEC 6

Minimum soil cover to avoid bare soil in periods that are most sensitive

Aim: to limit or reduce soil erosion by promoting minimum soil cover on grassland and arable land.

- Promoting minimum soil cover on grassland and arable land
- Minimise soil loss and damage due to the actions of livestock during sensitive periods

GAEC conditions:

- Do not overgraze or otherwise use sand dunes and/or grassland that could result in erosion
- Are the conditions in respect of the use of non-selective herbicide (NSH) on grassland being observed, e.g., establishment and retention of green cover following the use of NSH's at certain times during the year? (addressed under SMR 2)
- Is there evidence of rutting or poaching damage to permanent pasture grassland caused by animal grazing activity or the inappropriate use of non-tillage machinery?
- Is there evidence of severe poaching leading to soil erosion in grassland particularly e.g., around supplementary feeding points, the creation of sacrifice paddocks?

GAEC 6 - poaching

GAEC 6

GAEC 6: Is there evidence of inappropriate land reclamation works, and other works, which lead to inadequate soil and ground cover

Land reclamation works leading to the complete removal of all soil vegetative cover

-on high risk sites (sloped/ proximity to water), and/ or

-during high risk periods (winter), and/ or

-over a prolonged period of time (>4 months)

Has a 3m grass/ vegetated margin been provided along non-water feature boundaries (hedgerows, treelines, stone walls, etc) where non-grass forage crops are being grazed in-situ?

The 3m grass/ vegetated buffer applies to the **entire external perimeter of the parcel** except where these areas are 'waters' (4m required under G3C)

A non-grass forage crop (e.g. forage rape) must **not** be sown in these margin areas

These margin areas must **not** be fenced

The 3m margin must remain in place while grazing of the adjacent forage crop is taking place.

Has an adequate lie back area been provided and have the necessary additional measures been taken to limit or minimise soil disturbance where non-grass forage crops are being grazed in situ?

Lie-back

An adequate lie-back (at least 30% of the total lie-back/crop area) is mandatory for grazing livestock.

Example: 3.5ha forage crop requires a minimum lie back of 1.5ha (3.5/0.7 = 5).

Lie-back area can be grass or stubble and must be accessible at all times.

Necessary additional measures (including):

Good site location (well drained)

Provide vegetated margins

Efforts to avoid repeated poaching (move stock in poor conditions, use backing fence)

Loosen soil when conditions allow

For stubble lie-back, sufficient green cover established as required under the stubble management requirements of the Nitrates Regulations.

Thank You