Farming on the edge might ultimately end up planted with conifers. If no longer used as pasture for cattle much of this reversion of land "improved" in the 1960s and 1970s will fall far short of maintaining the broad spectrum of habitats and landscapes. The radical changes to agricultural support policies and the market have enhanced the price of land and thus created the financial incentive for farmers to convert agricultural land to other uses. The continuing intensification of agriculture is having such a negative impact on the environment as well as the uplands of the east. This is a reflection, in nature conservation terms, of features such as the upland and coastal heaths of Donegal, the blanket bogs of Mayo, the limestone grasslands of Sligo and Clare and the rocky landscapes of the Aonan islands, and so on. Agriculture contractors and merchants supplying feed and fertilisers have to scale down their operations. Livestock marts will close, vets will be fewer and more expensive, forestry will expand on farmland, and house prices in rural areas will increase as tourism takes over from farming. The small size of most farms and the strong cultural traditions of the farmers add to the diversity of habitats at the landscape scale. Farming has been enjoyed and maintained wet heaths and moors, a range of grasslands from mountain grazing to saltmarshes and machair, as well as a variety of marsh, wetland and river-side vegetation used as pasture, all of which are of very high nature conservation value. As yet there has been no research work carried out on Ireland on where HNV farmland is found but a study carried out in 2003 for the European Environment Agency (EEA) recognised two types of HNV farmland that occur widely in Ireland:

**Type 1:** Farmland having a high proportion of semi-natural vegetation.

**Type 2:** Farmland having a mosaic of habitats and/or low- intensity land uses. Using the HNV model, predictive maps of HNV farmland were produced. For Ireland (see map) they include much of the marginal agricultural areas of the western counties as well as the uplands of the east. This is a reflection, in nature conservation terms, of features such as the upland and coastal heaths of Donegal, the blanket bogs of Mayo, the limestone grasslands of Sligo and Clare and the rocky landscapes of the Antrim islands, and so on.

Where is HNV farmland found in Ireland?

The Nature of Irish Farming

High Nature Value farmland in Ireland

In recent decades farming in Europe has become progressively industrialised and specialised compared to the past when farming had to work with nature and the landscape. The continuing intensification of agriculture is having such a negative impact on the environment that the focus of agri-environment policies is to rectify some of this damage. So it might come as a surprise to find that most of Europe's biologically richest areas are farmland, including a significant part of Ireland, and that this "high nature value" (HNV) will only be sustainable by maintaining a high nature value farming system that will sustain them. There should be a new scheme specifically targeting HNV farming areas. When the proposed reform of the LEA scheme happens, it must have HNV farmland as a central element. New schemes must assess properly and fully the management costs and benefits of these marginal farms. These are quite big steps. The first steps are straightforward - we must identify the HNV areas and describe the optimal farming systems that will sustain them. There should be a new scheme specifically targeting HNV farming areas. When the proposed reform of the LEA scheme happens, it must have HNV farmland as a central element. New schemes must assess properly and fully the management costs and benefits of these marginal farms. These are quite big steps. The first steps are straightforward - we must identify the HNV areas and describe the optimal farming systems that will sustain them. There should be a new scheme specifically targeting HNV farming areas. When the proposed reform of the LEA scheme happens, it must have HNV farmland as a central element. New schemes must assess properly and fully the management costs and benefits of these marginal farms. These are quite big steps. The first steps are straightforward - we must identify the HNV areas and describe the optimal farming systems that will sustain them. There should be a new scheme specifically targeting HNV farming areas. When the proposed reform of the LEA scheme happens, it must have HNV farmland as a central element. New schemes must assess properly and fully the management costs and benefits of these marginal farms. These are quite big steps. The first steps are straightforward - we must identify the HNV areas and describe the optimal farming systems that will sustain them.
**High Nature Value farmland**

A large proportion of Irish farmland is still managed in a way that works with nature and the landscape. This type of farmland is referred to as High Nature Value (HNV) farmland.

What the HNV concept recognises is that the nature interest of these HNV areas is intimately linked with farming practices and survives because of farming not despite it. So in HNV areas the preservation of biological diversity and nature value is linked with safeguarding the continuation of farming and long-established farming practices. Until recently, the mixture of grassland and heath vegetation characteristic of much of Ireland, grazed in an extensive way with low stock densities, provided a relatively stable habitat for insects, mammals and birds. And despite the developments in farming, forestry and peat extraction that have reduced its extent and quality, there are still areas of farmland that have the potential to support rare species such as the chough, crane and marsh fritillary butterfly.

**Past and current pressures on High Nature Value farmland in Ireland**

Land-use in Ireland has had a turbulent history so we should be under no illusions about centuries of stability during which farming and wildlife were in harmony.

But it is true that the high nature value of some of Ireland's agricultural areas is a legacy from a time when farming was at a subsistence level, when a typical farm would have needed livestock, have grown oats and potatoes, and kept hens and ducks. Farm labour would be cheap and plentiful and living conditions often poor. Income was low but there were few alternatives.

Over the past forty years this has been replaced with commercial farming, moving more and more towards sheep-dominated enterprises in HNV farming areas. This would have happened despite subsidies although the changes would probably have been slower.

In the past a farmer wanted to stay at home he had no choice other than subsistence farming. Today there are an increasing number of options including part-time farming and now, with the Single Farm Payment, potentially reducing farming activity to the absolute minimum. The financial returns from farming are low compared with off-farm work and there is little incentive for young people to go into agriculture. At the same time the current generation of farmers isn’t getting any younger and when they go much of the resistance to change will be removed, and the knowledge lost.

**Why should we conserve High Nature Value farmland in Ireland?**

In 2004, the Environment Ministers of the Council of Europe agreed not only to identify HNV farmland but also to protect it.

Irish food is more and more being marketed as the product of genuine, healthy “traditional” agriculture and landscape. Postcards in Donegal make much of the thatched cottage, corn stacks and mosaics of tillage and hayfields, such as here in Magherorarty, one of the last of this type.

**Predictions for the future**

Although it is difficult to predict, short-term trends in farming in HNV areas are likely to include more intensive use of the green land, a shift to higher output breeds and a reduction or even a cessation in the use of the hills and mountains. Farmers in marginal (HNV) areas now have the greatest incentive to cease or reduce production.

A long-term scenario might be:

1. A small core of full time, specialised, commercial and highly mechanised farmers with large amalgamated farms, concentrating activities on the better ground to maximise output.
2. ‘Part-time’ farmers working full-time off farm. Again concentrating on the best ground, housing livestock and using contractors for cultivation and silage.
3. ‘Lifestyle’ farmers generally low input / low output and drawing the Single Farm Payment, Compensatory payments, REPS and forestry payments - many older farmers in the marginal areas are already in this position.
4. Farmers who do the absolute minimum possible because of the incentive of the Single Farm Payment and the pressure of falling market prices. The extent to which this may become a reality is unclear. What is certain is that it is most likely to happen in HNV farming areas where farming without support is uneconomic.

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