



# ROLLING WITH NATURE

Padraig Moran's plans for a 107ac holding were dashed when his land was designated a Special Area of Conservation. But through the Farm Plan Scheme, both the farmer and his land were taken care of, writes **Majella O'Sullivan**

**W**HEN Offaly man Padraig Moran bought his farm in 1991, Ireland was on the cusp of a building boom.

The 107ac holding at Glaster, Lusmagh, Banagher, was going to be Padraig's future. Having grown up on a farm, he was anxious to start his own business.

He planned to finish cattle and exploit a quarry on his land that would supply sand and gravel to the building industry.

His plans were derailed just six years later when he learned that his lands had been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

The Moran property was caught on all sides and Padraig has found himself farming for conservation around three different designations. On one border it has the wet lands of the River Brosna, an important bird sanctuary which was designated an SAC. Part of the lands were on a raised bog that included ancient woodland. These were designated a Special Protection Area (SPA).

Even most of the remaining grassland was esker and found to hold more than 40 species of native plants, the most important being the Orchid Morio. These were designated a Natural Heritage Area (NHA).

What it meant to Padraig was that he couldn't farm as he had planned, as the designation placed enormous restrictions on how he conducted his enterprise. It even ruled out using the quarry to extract gravel.

"Originally I wasn't very happy with the designation," Padraig admits. "The gravel was worth a lot of money and it was one of the reasons I purchased the farm."

Understandably, Padraig and his wife, Fiona, fought the designation, even taking their appeal to the European Court, which rejected their case.

"We fought it as much as we could but there was no way out."

Andy Bleasdale is the head of the **biodiversity** unit of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. He says Padraig's reaction is not untypical of land owners whose properties have been designated.

"Some people are very suspicious of the designation," he says. "However, now, because of the incentives available in the Farm Plan Scheme, farmers are prepared to farm for conservation, if the price is right."

The scheme was launched in February 2006 and later that year the first plans were approved. The NPWS says that interest in the scheme is growing each year. To date, 238 farms have been approved, covering more than 8,420ha of designated areas or commonage.

More than 80 planners have been trained and an additional course run by the NPWS for 20 planners is being organised this month. The total payment committed to farmers so far is €1,176,644. The scheme is exchequer funded, but monitored by the EU. The Moran farm is one of 42 farms in Co Offaly that have been approved so far.

The average target area per plan is 35ha with an average payment to each farmer of €5,000. The Morans have also been compensated for the loss of the quarry.

"We need farmers otherwise we have no one to implement the schemes and to be the custodians of this heritage," Andy says.

"When the money is committed, it cannot be reneged upon."

Most of the Farm Plan Scheme planners are also REPS planners. Kilbeggan-based Michael Martyn was assigned to the Moran farm. He explains that although he's paid by the NPWS, he works for the farmer.

"All farmers are aware of REPS, but the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme may prove a better scheme for them," he says.

"Unlike REPS, where you have

your measures and must apply them, in the Farm Plan Scheme we look at the individual farm situation and so it's much more flexible. We engage with the farmer and listen. We have certain knowledge of the scheme but the farmer knows his own farm."

This is the Moran's second year in the Farm Plan Scheme. Padraig says he's now much happier with the designation status as it has been made financially worth his while. Together with the NPWS they negotiated a deal for compensation for the use of the quarry and the restrictions to his farm practice. One of the most important things for the part-time drystock farmer is that he's restricted in the times he can use his lands for grazing.

"Because of the orchid-rich grassland, it has to be closed to grazing for about six months of the year," Michael Martyn explains. "It's closed from December 1 to February 28 and then it closes again on April 20 to July 20 to allow the orchids to seed. However, it can be more flexible and we do allow grazing above and beyond that."

Michael explained that he drew up the plan for the farm with Padraig, taking all the factors into account.

The main benefit of joining the Farm Plan Scheme is that the landowner gets paid for costs or losses incurred because of designations or commonage framework plans. The plan itself is paid for by the NPWS. It sets out clearly what the farmer's obligations are to observe the law and deals with any consent they need to get so that they can get on with the business of farming.

The benefits for the rest of us are huge in terms of the conservation of our natural heritage.

Two years into the plan, which is a five-year commitment, Padraig is more positive.

"I'd have no hesitation in advising any farmer in a Special Area of Conservation to get involved," he says.



**Padraig Moran (left) and Michael Martyn of National Parks and Wildlife Services** KEITH HENEGHAN/PHOCUS