

Re-introducing Cattle Grazing to the MacGillycuddy Reeks

The MacGillycuddy Reeks is an area of high nature value farmland and designated as a Special Area of Conservation for the rare and threatened habitats and species it supports including peatland habitats such as dry and wet heath and blanket bog. Today, visitors to the Reeks will see the mountainous landscape dotted with sheep, which comprise the majority of the livestock on the mountain. Other wild grazers, such as deer and feral goats, may be spotted too. In the past summer grazing with cattle would have been a common, although they have been largely absent in recent times. The MacGillycuddy Reeks European Innovation Partnership Project (EIP), a locally led agri-environmental project, led by South Kerry Development Partnership, funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 is supporting participating landowners in re-introducing cattle to the upland areas in the Reeks.

Grazing animals play a crucial role in managing the vegetation. To have healthy heath and bog habitats it is important to get the balance of plant species right across the site. A good grazing regime will help prevent erosion of the peat, reduce or remove the need for burning, reduce opportunities of the spread of bracken and create peatlands with varied structure that allows biodiversity to flourish.

Traditionally sheep and cattle would have shared the mountain and eaten different things. Since cattle have been largely absent on the mountain in recent years, certain species such as purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*) and gorse (*Ulex spp.*) which are less palatable to sheep have increased forming dense grassy tussocks and scrub. This vegetation can create fuel for wildfire or farmers may be tempted to burn the areas to regain grazing habitat. Cattle, being much heavier than sheep also play an important role in trampling bracken which is spreading in the uplands and threatening the natural habitats. Uncontrolled burning can have devastating impacts on these sensitive habitats resulting in the loss of the very important moss layer, including special group of mosses called sphagnum mosses that help to create the peat and are responsible for the formation of the heath and bogs.

The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project are expecting that the re-introduction of cattle to the area will help to restore balance and improve the condition of heath and bog habitats by discouraging uncontrolled burning, reducing the frequency of wildfires and limiting the spread of bracken. Participating farmers have been given Habitat Awareness Training and the MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project Team have facilitated a cattle B&B system that enables farmers to bring cattle in to graze during summer months without the need to purchase them and house them for the remainder of the year. Farmers are encouraged to use traditional breeds such as Kerry or Droimeann cattle where possible as these are better suited to the uplands than the commercial breeds. Cattle were re-introduced to a number of sites last summer and initial feedback indicates that the farmers were both surprised and pleased with the results. Several farmers commented on what good condition the cattle were in coming off the mountain and effect they had in opening up the vegetation.

For more information please contact the Project Team.