Implementation of agri-environmental measures in Ireland: Case study of the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme

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Since the late 1980's improvement of the quality of all waters has been a national priority. Eutrophication and contamination of drinking waters with faecal bacteria, particularly groundwaters, are highlighted as the main water quality issues. The length of Irish river channel classified as unpolluted has increased steadily from 67% in 1995-97 to 71.4% in 2004-06. Nitrate contamination of groundwaters is not widespread in Ireland with only 2% of public water supplies in excess of the maximum admissible concentration although an increasing number of supplies exceed the guideline value. Agriculture has been implicated as one of the main sources of nutrient loss to water and this led to the introduction of the National Nitrate Action plan in 2006. Irelands grassland based agricultural systems have had many benefits to environmental quality often associated with less intensive farming methods and associated traditional farming practices. The growing realization, at an EU level, of the benefits and impacts that agriculture has on the environment led to the introduction of Agri-Environmental Measures to reduce agricultural impacts on the environment and positively contribute to environmental protection and enhancement. They were introduced through a number of EU regulations such as 797/85 EC and 2078/92. In Ireland, the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) was established in 1994. This scheme was designed to financially reward farmers for carrying out their farming practices in an environmentally friendly manner and to ensure good environmental practice on farms. REPS places compulsory limits on inorganic fertiliser rates and application timing. The scheme has been expanded over recent years to include additional environmental measures and to bring it up to date with recent legislative changes such as the implementation of the Nitrates Directive. It also contains a large range of other compulsory and optional measures with a strong emphasis on the enhancement of biodiversity. It is estimated that over 54,000 Irish farms received REPS payments in 2007, worth over €310m and accounting for 40% of Irish agricultural land. Measures for the protection of water quality account for 5 of 11 basic measures and 4 of 12 supplementary measures. The presentation will review the water quality related measures as they pertain to the achievement of good status for waters. The efficacy of specific measures in REPS is currently subject to review in a number of research projects nationally and internationally. Further research is currently being conducted to identify new measures for inclusion in the scheme such as manipulation of water course margins and cattle drinking water access.