

## **Sustainable Agriculture Programme – contributing to enhancing Water Quality in Northern Ireland**

DAERA's [Sustainable Agriculture Programme](#) (SAP) is striving to improve environmental outcomes while supporting a more resilient farming sector. A key aim is enhancing water quality, particularly by reducing nutrient losses, improving soil management, and restoring natural processes across agricultural landscapes. SAP plans to deliver this through a suite of schemes and initiatives; most notably the [Farming with Nature Package](#), the [Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme](#), the [Soil Nutrient Health Scheme](#), and emerging excess nutrient policies.

1. **Farming with Nature Package** is one of SAP's key environmental initiatives, offering payments to farmers for actions that support ecosystem recovery, biodiversity enhancement, and water protection. It encourages practices that directly reduce nutrient run-off and improve river and freshwater habitats, such as:
  - Establishing riparian buffers that intercept nutrients before they reach watercourses.
  - Planting hedgerows, trees and multi-species covers crops and creating field margins, which slow overland flow and capture sediments.

These landscape-level interventions help reduce phosphorus and nitrogen losses, two of the primary drivers of water quality decline in Northern Ireland's freshwater systems.

2. **The Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme** (SFIS) will be rolled out to support improved environmental performance on farms. It is planned that SFIS will support technology which will help reduce soil compaction and erosion, poaching near watercourses by livestock, and the risk of run-off or leaching of nutrients and chemicals.
3. **Soil Nutrient Health Scheme: High-Resolution Nutrient Mapping for Better Decisions**

The Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) provides detailed soil analysis and nutrient-mapping data to help farmers make informed and environmentally sustainable management decisions, with the long-term aim of reducing agricultural impacts on water quality. The SNHS is one of the actions included in the Lough Neagh Action Plan. It directly supports water quality by:

- Preventing over-application of fertilisers, a significant source of nutrient pollution.
- Helping farm businesses target inputs more precisely, reducing the risk of nutrient surpluses washing into watercourses.
- Enhancing awareness of soil nutrient status across Northern Ireland to tailor regional nutrient management strategies.

#### **4. Excess Nutrient Policy Development**

Northern Ireland faces significant challenges around excess nutrients. Although still evolving, SAP's policy will aim to facilitate a sustainable model of slurry management and nutrient recovery in Northern Ireland which will enable a reduction in excess nutrients from agriculture. Central to this framework will be a shift from land spreading

to nutrient recovery and export; supporting environmental, economic, and climate goals, and ensuring a sustainable agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

## **5. Environmental Benefits from SAP Livestock Schemes**

SAP schemes such as the [Bovine Genetics Project](#), [Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme](#), and the [Suckler Cow Scheme](#) will improve herd efficiency, leading to positive environmental outcomes. By enhancing traits related to feed conversion, animal health, and overall herd performance, these schemes can reduce nutrient outputs, lower emissions, and optimise land use, helping to protect and enhance water quality.

## **6. Potential support through SAP for the Arable Sector**

Consideration is being given to potentially offering financial support to the arable sector through a bespoke SAP scheme. Supporting this sector can improve water quality and reduce phosphate pollution when support is targeted at improving nutrient management, soils and land use and management near water.

## **Conclusion**

DAERA's Sustainable Agriculture Programme brings together a coordinated set of schemes and policy measures to improve water quality in Northern Ireland while supporting a financially resilient and sustainable farming sector. Through the Farming with Nature Package, the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme, the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme and the development of excess nutrient policy, SAP aims to reduce nutrient losses, improve soil and land management, and improve biodiversity across agricultural landscapes. These interventions are complemented by measures to improve livestock efficiency, helping farmers to adopt environmentally beneficial practices in ways that strengthen business viability, manage costs and support long-term economic resilience alongside environmental improvement.