

# Unimproved Land Test Form

## 1 Introduction

This note can be used as an aid by applicants and their advisers when deciding on which category their land falls into (arable/improved or unimproved) when considering an application under the SFGS: Farmland Premium (FP) and/or SFGS: Locational Premium. The process outlined below will also be the basis used by SEERAD and FCS for confirming land categories when assessing applications.

The references for this assessment will be IACS data sheets, agri-environment scheme audits or the applicant's own cropping records. If an applicant does not have any of these references the land in question will have to be assessed by the applicant by carrying out one of the grassland assessment tests referred to in section 6 below.

## 2 IACS Data Sheets

If the land has been the subject of an AAA (Area Aid Application) under IACS, the field data sheets, which include the area(s) in question, will be your primary reference.

### 2.1 Is the area declared as rough grazing (RGR) under IACS?

If the area has been entered as rough grazing (RGR) on your field data sheet, count this land as being 'unimproved'.

If not;

### 2.2 Has the area been claimed as arable or set-aside within the past 12 years, OR registered as temporary grassland (TGRS), i.e. grass under 5 years old, under IACS?

If the whole area has been accepted as being one of the above under IACS, count this ground as being 'arable/improved'.

If not;

### 2.3 If the area was last claimed as arable or set-aside more than 12 years ago, OR if the area is declared as permanent grass (PGRS), i.e. grass over 5 years old, under IACS:

These areas may not have been cultivated for a considerable time and in some cases may have reverted back to an unimproved state. Also, by definition PGRS areas are longer term pasture areas, but the designation doesn't give an indication as to whether they are improved or unimproved. To ascertain if these areas are improved, applicants will have to carry out a field inspection (see 6 below) and check these areas against the SFGS:FP improved land definitions, which are:

- improved land means land used for grazing where over one third of the sward comprises, singly or in mixture, ryegrass, cocksfoot, timothy or white clover, or
- land that has been improved by management practices such as liming and top dressing, where there is not a significant presence of sensitive plant species indicative of unimproved grassland.

### 2.4 If the inspection confirms that the grass sward is improved:

Count this land as 'improved'. If it is not improved, count it as 'unimproved land'.

## 3 Agri-Environment Audits

If the land features in an agri-environment scheme environmental/conservation audit, you may wish to use that as a reference, either in conjunction or separately from your IACS data.

### 3.1 Is the area identified as being of conservation interest?

If the area has been identified as being of conservation interest in an agri-environment scheme environmental/conservation audit descriptive map, count this land as being 'unimproved'.

Note that in this situation conservation interest means that these areas will have already been identified as being; rough grazings, unimproved pastures, native woodlands, wetlands, water margins, reverted improved grassland, machair or dune grassland.

Also note that if you are currently participating in an agri-environment scheme, you may well be restricted from changing the land use to forestry/woodlands. Please check the situation with your local SEERAD office before proceeding any further with your SFGS application.

**3.2 If the area is not identified as being of conservation interest within an agri-environment scheme but is in agricultural production:**

If the area is not identified as having conservation interest (as above) but is in agricultural production, this ground may be 'arable/improved land'. A field inspection assessment should be undertaken and the area checked against the SFGS:FP improved land definition.

**3.3 If the inspection confirms that the grass sward is improved:**

Count this land as 'improved'. If it is not improved, count it as 'unimproved land'.

## 4 Cropping Records

**Only** if the land has **not** been the subject of an IACS AAA and does **not** feature in an agri-environment scheme environmental/conservation audit, will your cropping/grazing records be acceptable as the primary reference. Records should only be used if they are indisputably accurate.

**4.1 Has an arable crop grown been grown or the land reseeded within 12 years of the application year?**

If an arable crop (e.g. cereal, linseed, oilseed rape, protein crop, potatoes, soft fruit, turnips) has been grown, or if the land has been reseeded within 12 years of the year of application, count this ground as being 'arable/improved land'.

**4.2 Was an arable crop grown or land reseeded outwith 12 years of the application year?**

At the application stage, if it is over 12 years since the ground was either under an arable crop or was reseeded, cropping records will not be acceptable and the area should be assessed by carrying out an inspection of the ground (see 5.2 below).

**4.3 If the inspection confirms that the grass sward is improved:**

Count this land as 'improved'. If it is not improved, count it as 'unimproved land'.

## 5 Complex Areas

**5.1** If the land is split into distinctive unimproved and improved areas (such as an unimproved bank in an otherwise improved field) applicants should map and measure the areas of each land category separately based on the definitions given above.

**5.2** In some parts of the country, land which has been improved in the past is reverting back to an unimproved state. These areas are often characterised by an initial invasion of rushes. The areas in question will appear as a mosaic of localised unimproved and improved ground. Again, these cases should be inspected and assessed by the applicant and the land categories mapped and measured separately.

## 6 Grassland Assessment Tests

**6.1 Improved Land Test** – Where applicants have to inspect the land in order to ascertain the land category, it is envisaged that the most common check will be the improved land test. In most cases this will be able to be carried out by the applicant who should choose ten points at random within the field or the area of land under consideration, excluding field margins, headlands and obvious areas of different vegetation. At each point an examination of the vegetation in a circle 1m in diameter should be carried out and if at least one third of any of the circle is covered with the four improved grassland species, then it should be counted. If six or more of the ten circles are counted then the land should be assessed as being 'improved land'.

**6.2 Unimproved Land Test** – In some cases, especially in permanent pasture situations where some agricultural improvements have been carried out by way of liming and top dressing, it may not be obvious that the sward is unimproved. In these cases the applicant should establish if there is a significant presence of sensitive plant species indicative of unimproved grassland. The list of species at 6.3 displays indicator species typical of unimproved grassland. Ten 1m circular sites should be chosen at random, and if 5 or more of the listed species are found in a circle it should be counted. If six or more test circles are counted then the land should be assessed as being 'unimproved land'.

### 6.3 Unimproved Land Test Form

Unimproved Grassland Indicators		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Grasses</b>	Quaking grass: <i>Briza media</i>										
	Sheep's fescue: <i>Festuca ovina</i>										
	Crested hair grass: <i>Koeleria macrantha</i>										
	Meadow oat-grass: <i>Arenula pratensis</i>										
	Upright brome: <i>Bromus erectus</i>										
	Tor grass: <i>Brachypodium pinnatum</i>										
	False oat-grass: <i>Arrhenatherum elatius</i>										
	Yellow oat-grass: <i>Trisetum flavescens</i>										
	Wavy hair-grass: <i>Deschampsia flexuosa</i>										
	Mat grass: <i>Nardus stricta</i>										
	Sweet vernal grass: <i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>										
	Purple moor grass: <i>Molinia caerulea</i>										
<b>Sedges and Rushes</b>	Sedges: <i>Carex</i> spp.										
	Wood rushes: <i>Luzula</i> spp.										
	Cotton grasses: <i>Eriophorum</i> spp.										
<b>Herbs with basal rosettes but leafless flowering stems</b>	Rough Hawkbit: <i>Leontodon hispidus</i>										
	Autumn Hawkbit: <i>Leontodon autumnalis</i>										
	Stemless thistle: <i>Cirsium acaule</i>										
	Cat's-ear: <i>Hypochoeris radicata</i>										
	Cowslip: <i>Primula veris</i>										
<b>Herbs with basal and stem leaves (usually smaller)</b>	Bulbous buttercup: <i>Ranunculus bulbosus</i>										
	Common knapweed: <i>Centaurea nigra</i>										
	Salad burnett: <i>Sanguisorba minor</i>										
	Great burnet: <i>Sanguisorba officinalis</i>										
	Dropwort: <i>Filipendula vulgaris</i>										
	Meadowsweet: <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>										
	Ox-eye daisy: <i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>										
	Hogweed: <i>Heracleum sphondylium</i>										
	Common sorrel: <i>Rumex acetosa</i>										
	Wood crane's bill: <i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>										
	Lady's mantle: <i>Alchemilla glabra</i>										
	Cuckoo flower: <i>Cardamine pratensis</i>										
	Tormentil: <i>Potentilla erecta</i>										
	Small scabious: <i>Scabiosa columbaria</i>										
	Mouse-ear hawkweed: <i>Hieracium pilosella</i>										
	Pignut: <i>Conopodium majus</i>										
<b>Herbs with uniformly leafy stems, basal leaves usually smaller</b>	Common bird's foot trefoil: <i>Lotus corniculatus</i>										
	Squinancywort: <i>Asperula cynanchica</i>										
	Red clover: <i>Trifolium pratense</i>										
	Heath bedstraw: <i>Galium saxatile</i>										
	Meadow vetchling: <i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>										
<b>Annual herbs</b>	Fairy flax: <i>Linum catharticum</i>										
	Yellow rattle: <i>Rhinanthus minor</i>										
<b>Mat-formers</b>	Wild thyme: <i>Thymus praecox</i>										
	Common rockrose: <i>Helianthemum nummularium</i>										
	Horseshoe vetch: <i>Hippocrepis comosa</i>										
<b>Sub-shrubs</b>	Bilberry: <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>										
	Heather: <i>Calluna vulgaris</i>										
	Heaths: <i>Erica</i> spp.										
<b>Total</b>											

