

Circular 2/2011

12th April 2011

Information Note on the Agri-Environment Options Scheme 2011 (AEOS 2)

NB: This note is for guidance purposes only. Planners and those intending to apply for the Scheme should read the Terms & Conditions and the Specifications carefully and in full in order to inform themselves of the requirements of the Scheme.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine relaunched the AEOS Scheme on 6 April, 2011. Funding of €25m per annum has been allocated to the Scheme, with the maximum payment per farmer set at **€4,000** per annum.

Structure of the Scheme

The Scheme is broadly similar to last years in that farmers will be paid to undertake actions which specifically target 3 environmental challenges namely those of:

- Halting the loss of Biodiversity
- Contributing to the improvement of Water Quality and
- Combating Climate Change.

Farmers may choose from a menu of actions, depending on which challenge they intend targeting. Those farmers with Natura and Commonage land are given priority entry to the Scheme but must use the services of a Planner to complete a Sustainable Management Plan. If the only Natura land a farmer has is a designated river then he/she may choose the Water Quality option instead, which would mean they could fill the Form W themselves.

Entry to the Scheme will not be on a first come first served basis and will be based on a ranking system as follows:

Category 1:

Farms with Natura and/or non-Natura Commonage will rank first and be given automatic entry to the Scheme. However if the total number in this category exceeds the funding available those with Natura land will be given priority, followed by those with the largest areas.

Category 2:

Farm partnerships will rank second. If all cannot be given entry they will be prioritised according to a scoring system as set out in Annex 2 in the Terms & Conditions.

Category 3:

Farmers not in Category 1 or 2 will rank third. They will be ranked initially according to the scoring system in Annex 2 in the Terms & Conditions. If further selection is needed to limit the number in this category the following criteria will be used, in the following order:

- (a) Location of farms in Less Favoured Areas
- (b) Previous participation in REPS
- (c) Farm size (favouring smaller holdings) based on the utilisable agricultural areas declared in the 2010 Single Payment Scheme application.

Changes from last year

The Department carried out a comprehensive review of the first year of operation of AEOS and as a result there are some changes to this year's Scheme. These changes aim to increase the benefits to both farmers and the environment. The most significant changes, apart from to the Scheme Structure as dealt with above, are as follows:

- Amendments to the **scoring system** (Annex 2 of the Terms & Conditions).
- Contract period will be 5 years however the Terms & Conditions and payment rates apply up to the end of 2013. At that stage, farmers will have the option of withdrawing without penalty or opting to join whatever scheme may be introduced in the EU Financial Perspective programming period.
- Farmers approved into the Scheme must have **soil analysis** of all lands farmed **carried out**.
- Farmers with **short term rented Natura** land will not be required to have a Sustainable Management Plan covering those lands.
- **Wild Bird Cover** is available to all farmers (previously only grassland) and can be on one plot up to 3 ha (maximum plot size previously was 1 ha).
- **Derogation farmers** or **Organic farmers** will not be able to pick actions which involve reduced fertiliser use i.e. Species Rich Grassland, Traditional Hay Meadow, Riparian Margins, Arable Margins and Establishment and Maintenance of Habitats.
- **Riparian margin** widths have been increased by .5m (for same payment) to take account of change in baseline requirements.
- **Maximum** limit introduced for Species Rich Grassland, Traditional Hay Meadow, Trees, Hedgerow Planting, Coppicing and Laying, Establishment and Maintenance of Habitats, Water Trough Installation.
- **Minimum** area to be delivered for **Minimum Tillage** and **Green Cover Establishment from a Sown crop** increased from 2 to 4 hectares.
- **Traditional Orchards** action is no longer available.
- There are also some minor clarifications to the Specifications.

Eligible Applicants

Applicants must be a herdowner with an active herdnumber at the time of application. Those active in AEOS 1, the NPWS Farm Scheme or those REPS participants with an anniversary date after 30 April 2011 are not eligible to join AEOS 2. All applicants must submit a Single Payment Scheme application form in 2011.

Closing Date

The closing date for receipt of applications is **16 May, 2011**.

Documents

Full details of the Scheme are available on the Department's website at www.agriculture.gov.ie and will be available from the Department's local offices and Teagasc offices nationwide within a week.

Public Meetings

A series of information meetings for planners and farmers will be held as follows:

Friday 15 th April 2011	The Castle Court Hotel, Westport, Co. Mayo (2pm Planner, 8pm Farmers)
Tuesday 19 th April 2011	The Firgrove Hotel, Cahir Hill, Mitchelstown, Co. Cork (2pm Planner, 8pm Farmers)
Wednesday 20 th April 2011	Hotel Kilkenny, College Road, Kilkenny (8pm Farmers)
Wednesday 20 th April 2011	Longford Arms Hotel, Main Street, Longford (8pm Farmers)

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