

Goat Grazing project Howth & Appropriate Assessment

Background to goat grazing project

Until the 1940's much of the heathland on Howth used to be grazed by livestock and goats in particular. After the livestock disappeared, Gorse scrub and Bracken expanded and the heather vegetation increased in height over the next decades. This has resulted in a highly flammable landscape with a high fuel load and wildfires have become a regular occurrence on Howth. Historical pollen records have shown that wildfires were uncommon prior to the 1940's due to the presence of grazing animals. There are several locations with dense and tall Gorse scrub at Redrock, Carrickbrack Road, Shielmartin, Green Hollows and East Mountain, that have been identified as a major wildfire risk to nearby property by international wildfire experts. Wildfire breaks have been created in these areas by removing 20-40m strips of mature European Gorse.

Furthermore, a Dry Heath status assessment undertaken for the Howth Head SAC in 2019 shows that the heathland on Howth is in an unfavourable condition. The SSCOs for Howth Head SAC (NPWS 2016) give the overall conservation objective for Dry Heath as 'maintain the favourable condition'. However, based on the more detailed 2019 assessment, the authors of the study report recommend that it is more appropriate for the overall objective to be 'restore the favourable condition'. The implication is that active management is required to address the factors that are contributing to the unfavourable conservation condition rather than a situation of maintaining the status quo. One of the recommendations is to reduce the cover of Gorse and Bracken by 40ha (paragraph 4.6 of the heathland study report) to improve the overall status of the heathland. The Council has combined this recommendation to reduce acreage of the gorse with the gorse removal required for the wildfire management to limit the overall amount of intervention in the SAC and the sensitive landscape.

European gorse was removed from wildfire breaks in 2020 and 2021 at Bellinghams Farm, Redrock, Shielmartin, Carrickbrack road and East Mountain (Casana View and the Bailey/Summit areas). Ideally these wildfire breaks have short vegetation of either grass or heather to ensure that there is easy access to them by the fire brigade and little vegetative fuel is present that would allow a fire to travel across the wildfire break. Gorse is known to resprout from stumps and cleared areas are a great seedbed for Gorse seedlings that are currently dormant in the soil. To avoid the regeneration of gorse in the wildfire breaks and to keep the vegetation short requires ongoing management of the firebreaks. Three management options were considered: cutting, herbicide treatment and grazing.

- Cutting would have to be done every 2-3 months during the growing season and all cut material would have to be collected to ensure that no new fuel builds up in the firebreak. The collecting of cut material is time consuming and costly, even with specialized cut & collectors and the risk of damage to machinery is high due to the uneven and rocky nature of the heathland on Howth.

- Herbicides would have to be applied to the entire firebreak once or twice a year to kill off all vegetation in the wildfire breaks. Although probably effective from a wildfire perspective, the bare ground on slopes would be prone to erosion during heavy rainfall events. Furthermore, given the significant acreage of wildfire breaks, a substantial amount of herbicide would be required. The potential environmental impact of these chemicals on the flora and fauna of the SAC was not considered acceptable by the Council.
- Livestock are known to be able to keep vegetation and gorse regrowth short. Cattle, horses, sheep and goats were considered. Cattle, horses and sheep primarily favour grassy vegetation. The Old Irish Goat favours Gorse, bramble and bracken and will also consume small quantities of grass. Goat grazing was considered ideal to deal with the regenerating Gorse and to keep the vegetation low in the wildfire breaks.

Goat grazing pilot project

The goat grazing scheme is to run for an initial 3-year period 2021-2024 and will be managed in conjunction with the Old Irish Goat Society. The goats are to be deployed in wildfire breaks at Bellinghams Farm, Redrock, Carrickbrack road, Shielmartin and East Mountain. Once a site is sufficiently grazed, the herd shall be moved to a new location to repeat the same grazing management. The project will start with 25 goats that will be managed by a herder who will be on site 5 days a week. It is envisaged that the weekend cover will be provided by Council staff and local volunteers. It is envisaged that the number of goats will grow to around 100 goats over the 3 year period with the help of a breeding program. The goats will be on the farm in September for 3 weeks for mating purposes and between Christmas and February for kidding and no grazing management will take place during this period. With the exception at Bellinghams farm no fencing is needed to contain the goats within the wildfire breaks. No-fence collar technology will be used instead to define the grazing areas. The goats will not be allowed to go feral, they are to be inspected on a daily basis and will be brought back to the farm on a regular basis. The goats will be managed by means of organic farming practices, unless medical intervention is required due to serious illness.

Goat grazing and Appropriate Assessment

The 2019 Dry Heath study recommends to reduce the cover of Gorse and Bracken by 40 hectares within the Howth Head SAC and to restore heathland, grassland or woodland in its place. Part of this recommendation has been achieved by removing Gorse in areas of high wildfire risk. Reducing the wildfire risk helps to protect nearby properties but also reduces the risk of large scale wildfires that have a major impact on the habitats, flora and fauna of the SAC. The goat grazing will help to prevent gorse regeneration in the wildfire breaks and to keep the vegetation short enough to provide good access to these areas for the fire brigade should a wildfire occur.

Accordingly, it is considered that the goat grazing project is necessary for the management of the NATURA2000 site.

Furthermore:

- No new fencing is required to contain the goats in the grazing areas at Redrock, Shielmartin, Carrickbrack road and East Mountain. Instead, no-fence collars will be used to contain the goats by digital means. This method of livestock containment will ensure that no potential damage is done to the Howth head SAC as a result of fencing installation.
- The goats will graze the regrowth in the wildfire breaks that were created in 2020 with machinery that pulled out European Gorse. This regrowth consist primarily of European gorse stump regrowth and seedlings, bramble and Bracken. Although the grazing areas are located within the SAC, the vegetation occurring in the wildfire breaks is not qualifying interest habitat (European Dry Heath). The goats will not be grazing the Vegetated sea cliffs (of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts), which is the other qualifying interest habitat in the Howth Head SAC.
- No goat grazing is taking place on the cliffs in the Howth Head Coast SPA or North Bull Island SPA. No wildfowl or wader species in these two SPA's use the gorse stands or wildfire breaks area that the goats are grazing. The goat grazing project will therefore not affect the SPAs or their associated qualifying interest species.
- Grazing will be carefully supervised by the herder. Overgrazing is unlikely due to the lower numbers of goats present on each of the sites, but this will be carefully monitored. The vegetation development following deployment of the goats will also be monitored by consultant botanists.
- The base for the goat grazing project (cabin and shed) are located outside the SAC in Bellinghams farm.

In conclusion, it is considered that the goat grazing project is necessary for the management of the NATURA2000 site, any detrimental impact on the Howth Head and the adjoining SPAs is unlikely and therefore no screening for appropriate assessment is required as set out in the Habitats Directive.

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Appendix I: grazing locations highlighted in yellow

Bellinghams Farm (south off Carrickbrack road)



Redrock (south off Carrickbrack road)



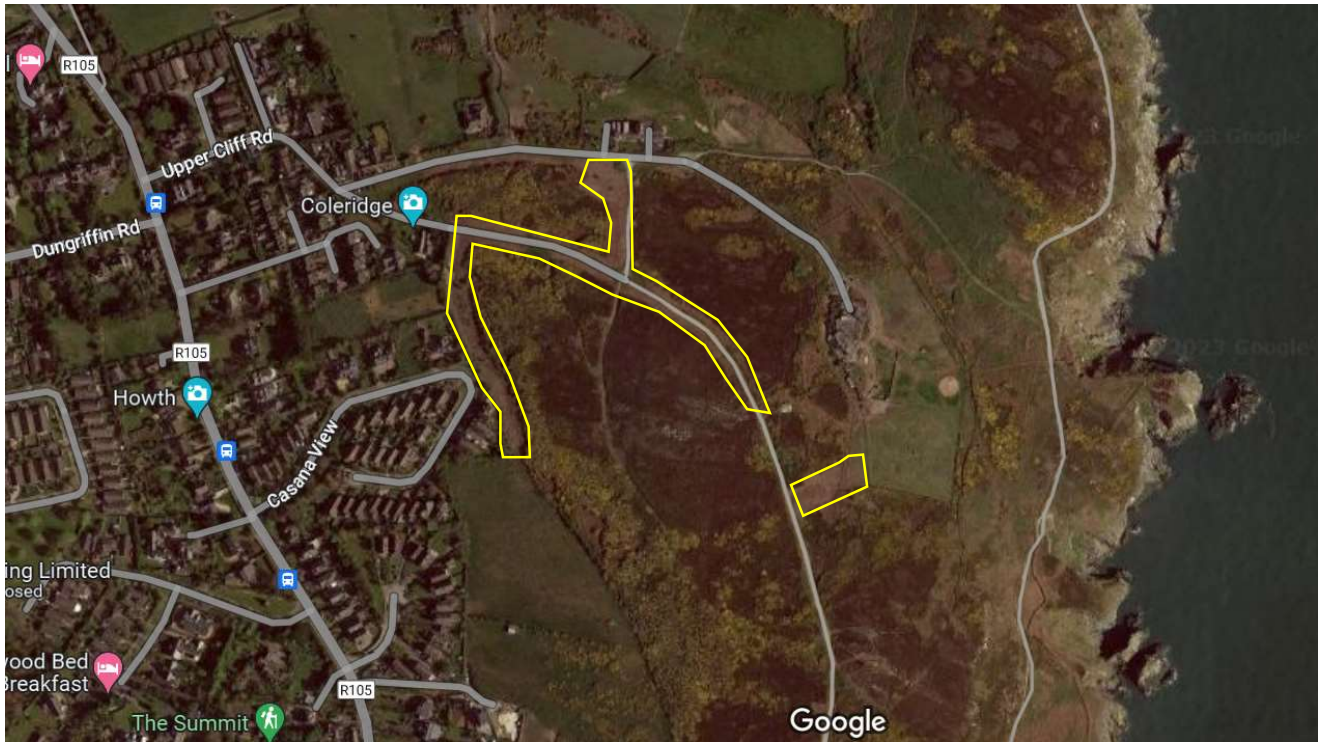
Shielmartin (north off carrickbrack road)



Carrickbrack road (Earlsfort)



East Mountain (Casana View)



East Mountain (Bailey)

