

Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership set to deliver

A joint bid by Countryside Services, AI Services and the Rural Development Council to deliver £30m of rural development funding was recently approved by DARD. As the newly formed 'Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership' prepares to launch, **Tristen Kelso** previews the new opportunities farmers can expect

The Partnership has been selected to deliver five rural development measures, all of which are Axis 1 measures. Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme is aimed at targeting assistance at farm level, in order to enhance the competitiveness of farm businesses.

The five measures are:

- Focus farms
- Farm family options
- Benchmarking
- Supply chain development
- Farm modernisation

The first tranche of the Farm Modernisation small grants scheme opened in February, with much publicity surrounding it as a result of the queues of farmers seeking to apply.

'FARMER FRIENDLY'

Asked about the new organisation, David Mark of the Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership said:

"The combination of a farmer-owned organisation, a farmers' co-operative and a rural development organisation, I believe, offers a farmer-friendly approach to Rural Development, while still maintaining the level of professionalism required in managing public funds".

FARM FAMILY

According to Mark, Farm Family options is a 'feeder programme'. Farm families will receive one-to-one mentoring sessions to assess where they and their farm businesses are going.

It will also give participants the opportunity to consider their options to

progress themselves and their business.

In all instances, it will act as a tailored signposting service to other aspects of the Rural Development Programme, which may be of particular help, such as funding or training.

This service may prove to be particularly useful, given the very difficult financial circumstances many farm businesses find themselves in. Recruitment of farm family mentors is well underway, and includes people with particular expertise in business and financial matters.

BENCHMARKING

The partnership hopes that Benchmarking will be taken to a whole new level as a result of its own dedicated measure. Funding has been earmarked to recruit new farmers to benchmark their businesses, including many for the first time.

Partnership staff will assist farmers to gather the necessary data, while CAFRE advisers will provide the expert analysis.

David is confident that many farmers will be convinced of the benefits of benchmarking once they try it.

FOCUS FARMS

Training for newly selected Focus Farmers has been underway for some time. While the new focus farms have not yet been publicly announced, pre-bookings for visits to certain focus farms have already been taken. It is hoped first visits will begin in September.

On-farm diversification funding update

DARD has made £20m available for on-farm diversification between 2007 and 2013. A Diversification Measure is being delivered by seven local action groups or 'LAGs' across Northern Ireland.

A high number of applications have been received on the Measure's first call — 430 in total, worth an estimated £18m.

Letters of offer to successful applicants will be issued in September, but there will be several more opportunities to apply to future funding tranches.

Over the course of the current Rural Development Programme (2007-2013), farm diversification has ambitious targets of creating 400 jobs for new businesses sitting alongside existing farm enterprises.

A separate Business Creation and Development Measure is also available for new businesses, which will be created off-farm.

SWARD

SWARD, South West Action for Rural Development, is one



David Mark of the Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership.

FARM MODERNISATION

David Mark confirmed that all Farm Modernisation 'letters of offer' will have been issued to successful farmers by the end of August. Farmers will then have four months to purchase equipment and return completed claims to the Partnership.

SUPPLY CHAIN

As with the previous round of Rural Development funds, Supply Chain Development will give farmers the opportunity to get a greater understanding of how the supply chain operates.

The aim of the Supply Chain programme is to support collaboration within the supply chain, hopefully as a precursor to improving producer returns.

It provides expert guidance and financial assistance for the formation and development of new and existing

farming groups, with a particular focus on marketing. Groups of farmers with partners further along their respective supply chains in agri-food, horticulture, forestry and renewable energy sectors will be eligible to apply for support.

POTENTIAL

The Rural Development Programme certainly has the potential to offer a 'joined-up' approach to providing expert assistance to farmers and farm families. Let's hope the reality will be so.

More information on the new schemes will be available on Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership's website over the coming weeks: www.countrysiderural.co.uk

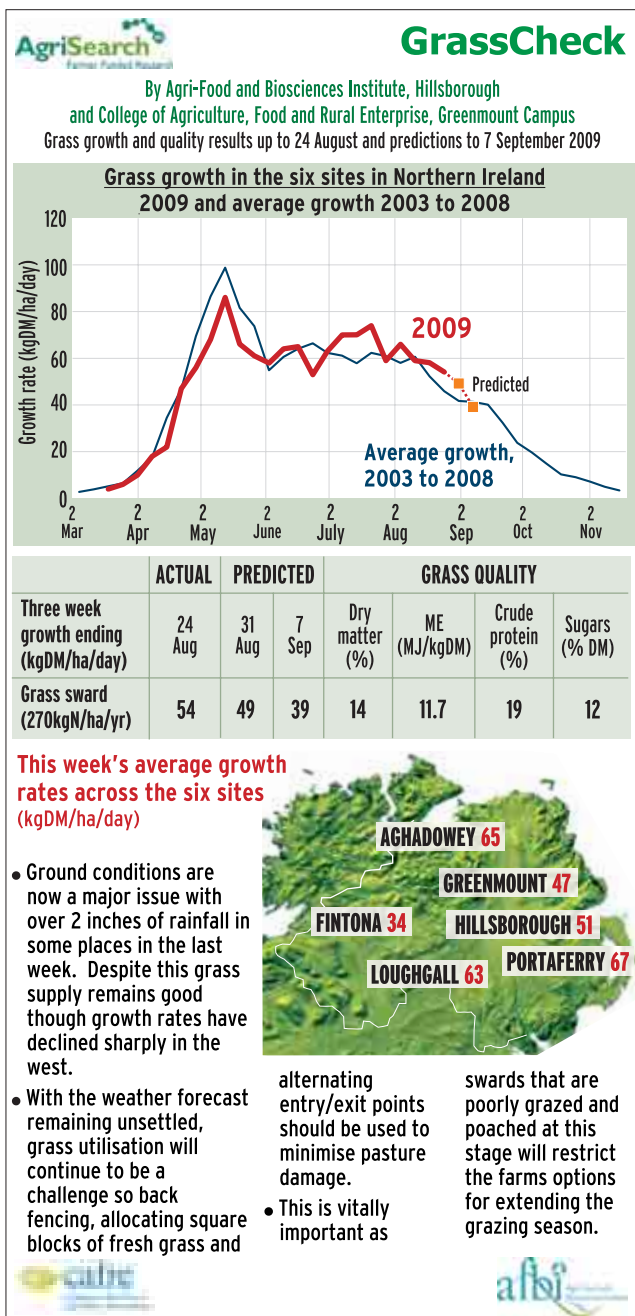
• The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

ventures in the current climate

A maximum £50,000 per application at 50% grant rate on project cost is available to successful applicants. Within the Diversification Measure, funding is also available to assist established diversification businesses with expansion at identical funding rates.

SWARD plans to open a new tranche of diversification funding in January 2010.

If you are in another area, check with your local action group for equivalent dates.



NORTHERN DIARY

THURS 27 AUGUST

- Ballymena mart's Blackface, Mule, Suffolk, Greyface sheep, 1,200 head, Cargan 12 noon.
- Suffolk sheep, show 6pm, sale 7pm, Newtown Stewart mart. Details Roberta TN 37 548 250
- Communication course at Loughry Campus Cookstown, open evening 3pm to 8pm. Details 0800 0284291 or visit the website www.cafre.ac.uk

FRI 28 AUGUST

- Mule ewe lambs sale, Crumlin mart, Masserene, 11.30am.
- Texel rams 112 head, show 5.30pm, sale 7pm, Kilrea mart.

SAT 29 AUGUST

- Ballymena mart's Mule, Suffolk Cheviot & Texel x Mule ewe lamb sale, 2,000 head Loughgiel 11.30am.
- D McAllister's Torr sale and Ewe Lamb sale 2,500 Mule & Suffolk x Cheviot ewe lambs, Cushendall mart 11am.
- Simmental club open day at Stephen Maguire, Maguiresbridge, 2pm to 6pm.

MON 31 AUGUST

- Carnlough sale Suffolk Che-

viot Crossbred & Texel cross, 1,500 head, Ballymena mart 11.30am. Ewe lambs 3,000 head including Mules, Mule x Texel and Suffolk Cheviot, Cushendall mart 12 noon.

- Texel club 96 rams 4 ewes, show 4.30pm sale 6.30pm, Rathfriland mart.

- Wicklow Cheviot, Suffolk Cheviot hoggets, Greyface hoggets, Border Leicester rams and females, Ballymena mart 7pm.

- Limousin production sale, R Savage Aghadolgan & H McCracken Seaview, Dungannon mart 7pm.

TUES 1 SEPTEMBER

- Dispersal Montbeliarde & Friesian dairy herd, 72 head for Baker Bros Armoy, Kilrea mart 11am.

- Ballymena mart's Cheviot Blackface and Crossbreds sale for Francis Mulvenna, Shilnavogie 1pm.

WEDS 2 SEPTEMBER

- Quad-X equipment demonstration, Whappstown Road Kells 10am and 1pm.

- Charollais prime lambs, show and sale, Ballymena mart 11am.

- Ballymena mart's Suffolk X and Mule ewe lamb sale, Cushendun 11am.

- Mule ewe lambs sale, Draperstown, 7pm.

THURS 3 SEPTEMBER

- Lely robot milking open day at Gregg Smyth Ballycastle, 10.30am. Details from Jim 07827 884 639.