Farm Carbon Calculators and Agricultural Support Briefing for MLAs – October 2026

Briefing prepared by Northern Ireland Environment Link's Sustainable Agricultural Policy Working Group (SAPWG)

Key Message

NIEL supports the use of farm carbon calculators and supports linking public funding to environmental outcomes. However, carbon calculator scores alone should not determine eligibility for agricultural support. Future schemes should assess a wider range of environmental outcomes, including biodiversity, water quality, soil health and climate resilience.

Why This Matters

Farm carbon calculators are increasingly being used to measure agricultural emissions and assess environmental performance. They are valuable tools that help farmers identify opportunities to improve efficiency and reduce emissions.

However, most calculators focus heavily on **emissions intensity** (emissions per litre of milk or kilogram of meat) rather than **total emissions**.

This distinction is important because a farm can improve its emissions intensity while maintaining or increasing its overall emissions through higher production.

Northern Ireland's climate targets require reductions in total emissions, not simply improvements in efficiency.

Key Concern

If agricultural support is linked too closely to carbon efficiency scores:

- farms delivering important nature and landscape benefits could be disadvantaged;
- wider environmental outcomes could be overlooked;

- public funding could reward efficiency improvements that do not deliver overall emissions reductions.

In particular, extensive beef and sheep and High Nature Value farming systems may score less favourably on carbon efficiency metrics despite delivering significant benefits for biodiversity, habitat management, carbon storage and rural communities.

NIEL Position

NIEL supports:

- Farm carbon auditing and carbon calculators.
- Linking public funding to environmental outcomes.
- Action to reduce agricultural emissions.

However, carbon accounting should form part of a broader sustainability framework **rather than acting as the sole measure of environmental performance.**

Key Asks

Future agricultural support schemes should assess:

- total farm emissions alongside emissions intensity;
- carbon sequestration and habitat management;
- biodiversity outcomes;
- water quality and nutrient management;
- soil health;
- ammonia emissions;
- wider ecosystem services and climate resilience.

Conclusion

Carbon calculators are useful tools, but they do not provide a complete picture of sustainability. **The most carbon-efficient farm is not always the most environmentally sustainable farm.**

NIEL therefore supports a broader sustainability scorecard that rewards both emissions reductions and wider environmental outcomes, ensuring public money delivers the greatest public benefit.

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