



Ardtornish

Feedback to the Rural Affairs Committee on the Scottish Government's first Rural Support Plan 2026-31

August 2026

Introduction

Ardtornish comprises some 12,000 hectares of land under management on the Morvern peninsula in North Argyll. Farming has been an important enterprise at [Ardtornish](#) for many years. Since 2017 the farming policy has been moving from a conventional West Highland system that had changed little since the 1950s to a regenerative way of farming, underpinned by organic certification. The need for change has been driven by the company adopting, in 2017, an overarching strategy of ecological restoration, in response to the climate and biodiversity crises. As change began at Ardtornish Scotland was beginning to develop its post-Brexit agricultural policy to replace the Common Agricultural Policy framework. The publication of the first Rural Support Plan (RSP) earlier this year provides Ardtornish with helpful visibility of the public financial support available to the farming enterprise at Ardtornish over the next 5 years. This helps planning. Fortunately, the RSP is quite well aligned with the plans for farming at Ardtornish.

Breaking down the silos

Traditionally, farming activities at Ardtornish operated in a disconnected way to woodland or deer management operations. This way of working was encouraged by historic support systems. That is no longer possible. Everything now happening at Ardtornish needs to be aligned with ecological system change, driving towards restoration of a much more diverse, healthy system. All land-based activities now must interlock. The number of activities is increasing. The farming enterprise interacts with the following other activities today:

- New native hardwoods creation
- Commercial Sitka plantation management
- Atlantic rainforest restoration
- Peatland restoration
- Riparian and sea loch restoration
- Commercial carbon capture enterprise
- Deer management
- Water catchment management for hydro-electric generation
- Community and visitor access

Slowly, more system thinking is happening at Ardtornish, adding complexity, but creating wonderful opportunities to develop the farm as a sustainable activity, making vital contributions to the overall task of ecological restoration. It is more complex than before,

requiring new ways of thinking and doing for everyone working on the land at Ardtornish. Instead of being extractive, the farm is becoming a contributor to the recovering ecosystem.

It is vital the RSP, as it evolves, does not reflect the narrow, farming-only focus of earlier policy thinking, but instead embraces the wider system thinking essential to deliver the five strategic outcomes.

Ardtornish alignment with the RSP's strategic outcomes

High-Quality Food Production

Ardtornish is committed to the production of high-quality beef and lamb. Ten years ago, all Ardtornish sheep and cattle were sold as store-stock for farmers elsewhere to finish. Today a small but growing number of sheep and cattle are finished, largely off grass, at Ardtornish. They are then slaughtered and butchered at the nearby Mull Abattoir, to be brought back to Ardtornish to be used in the Coal Shed Café, combined into the Ardtornish range of ready meals or sold through the butchery section of the Ardtornish shop. Provenance, short supply chains, taste and texture are valued by locals and visitors alike. This enterprise grows year by year.

Thriving Agricultural Businesses

It is not easy to make a West Highland farming business thrive. At Ardtornish this means doing more than efficiently produce high-quality food. The farm is required to provide ecosystem services, leading to biodiversity recovery and a reduction in carbon emissions. This value will be recognised by commercial customers paying for carbon capture by healthy native woodlands and by public policy support in return for producing public goods. In addition, developing agritourism products for the growing number of visitors coming to Ardtornish to learn about the rainforest and landscape-scale ecological restoration creates a further revenue stream.

Climate Change Mitigation and Adaption

Carbon storage is now a major enterprise at Ardtornish, structured around a 55-year contract to capture carbon on behalf of the University of Edinburgh's overseas students flying to Scotland over the rest of the century. The farm has moved to smaller, native cattle breeds. Inorganic fertilizer use does not feature in the future and building up organic matter in the low ground fields will continue as regenerative grassland management techniques bed in.

Nature Restoration

Alongside food production, Ardtornish cattle are now actively involved in this process: in their role in grassland management, in ranging out over the extensive highland grazings breaking up *Molinia* blankets that have built up over decades of deer and sheep grazing, and in the growing areas of native woodlands developing at Ardtornish. Soon their work will allow the long dormant seed stocks to germinate, quickly increasing diversity of plant and insect life. Geo-collars allow the delicate riverbank areas to recover and thrive to the benefit of the river ecosystems.

Support for a Just Transition

Traditional practice and culture is valued at Ardtornish. Change cannot be rushed. Sometimes its right to wait for a retirement. Bringing in skilled practitioners to teach new ways is a costly but essential part of transition that Ardtornish has committed to. No fence

digital collars are sophisticated digital tools which team members have become astute at managing.

Ideas on the development of SRP Tiers 3 and 4

The complexity of system change means that simplistic, one-size fits all, tick box mechanisms are likely to reduce the impact of the policy objectives. At the same time, mechanisms should not be overly complex to administer or measure for successful outcomes.

1. Learn lessons from the flexibility built into the Nature Restoration Fund mechanism. Aim for policy interventions to be outcome-led rather than measure-led. Tier 3 should be capable of supporting packages of actions designed around a landscape-scale ecological outcome, rather than simply adding more options to the existing AECS model.
2. Think in system terms, particularly Tier 3. Some examples:
 - a) Landscape-scale herbivore management. At Ardtornish deer need to be managed at landscape scale and to sufficiently low levels to enable landscape-scale habitat recovery. AECS already recognises the interaction between deer and livestock through its Moorland Management options, including deer and livestock, but this could go further by supporting collaborative, multi-holding plans integrating deer, sheep and cattle around a shared desired level of herbivore pressure; aligning with SG policy on landscape scale deer management.
 - b) Support innovative grazing systems. This could include short periods of relatively intensive/mob grazing followed by long recovery periods, particularly in low-productivity uplands, as well as targeted seasonal grazing to address Molinia, bracken or other habitat objectives. Current AECS recognises summer cattle grazing, but Tier 3 could allow much more adaptive spatial and temporal regimes.
 - c) An ecological grazing contract. Rather than prescribing stock numbers and dates, support could be based on outcomes such as increased tree regeneration, improved vegetation structure, reduced Molinia, riparian recovery or wildfire resilience, with grazing management adjusted in response to monitoring. Tier 3 should be capable of paying for changes in the condition and function of land, rather than simply paying for agricultural activities. In some upland situations, the most effective route to nature recovery may be fewer animals, but better targeted grazing. The support system should be able to recognise and reward that, even where reducing livestock numbers means a business cannot maintain the same level of Tier 1 support.
3. Tier 4 knowledge opportunities:
 - a) Fund practitioner-led advice and mentoring in regenerative/nature-recovery grazing, alongside formal AKIS activity.
 - b) Support landscape facilitators to bring landowners, farmers and deer managers together around integrated grazing and deer management plans.
 - c) Fund demonstration landscapes and monitoring, allowing innovative approaches to be tested, evaluated and shared rather than requiring everything to fit an established prescription.

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