



APPG on Game and Wildlife Conservation
6th September 2018

Notes from the discussion on
Creating a successful Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme

The GWCT presented their thoughts on how to integrate farming and the environment through the development of a successful ELM by identifying those aspects of current countryside stewardship that are good, bad and those that are lacking, before discussion was opened to the floor. The GWCT's "Farming through Brexit: a vision for the future" publication was given to attendees.

GWCT presentation by Dr Alastair Leake, Director of Policy & Allerton Project.

It needs to be acknowledged that the UK within Europe has done more than any other member to promote the environment through its use of rural development subsidies and when policy has got it right, engagement with farmers has been significant. Following the Curry report in 2002 the creation of the Entry Level Scheme (ELS) to deliver a broad and shallow tier attracted 70% farmer participation in England. In addition prioritising the environment over food production as seen in countries such as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland has resulted in the highest levels of subsidy and high food prices. The UK's policy needs to ensure a balance is struck and that farmers are still encouraged to produce affordable food.

The current environmental scheme

The good aspects were identified as:

1. The wide variety of options available encourages participation as there is something to suit each farmer's ambitions, business model, farming system and area.
2. The options on offer have been under-pinned by science. The GWCT has done research on Pollen & Nectar and wild bird seed mixes in particular.
3. High levels of farmer engagement (particularly under ELS) although the current more competitive scheme has seen lower levels.

The bad aspects were identified as:

1. Uniform start dates are not flexible and don't work with all farm businesses or with scheme administrators.
2. Many of the options have over-prescriptive management requirements.
3. Excessive evidence and paperwork requirements and bureaucratic inspection regime.

The aspects lacking in the current scheme were identified as:

1. Lack of appropriate advice on wildlife/biodiversity management for farmers. GWCT experience shows that providing professional advice to farmers results in an increase of 20% in biodiversity delivered.
2. Focus should be on the quality of management rather than just the area entered into the scheme
3. No soil options. Difficult to create an EU Soil Directive given huge variation in member state soil types etc. but now UK leaving CAP opportunity to design a policy to protect this important national asset.
4. Ability to embrace alternative management approaches such as agro-forestry.
5. Need to revisit reward levels.
6. Need to look at reasons why certain options not taken up, rather than remove them from the scheme e.g. conservation headlands.
7. Move towards Payment by Results (PBR) broadly supported but needs to be simple "qualification" – good, bad, average - with different levels of payment.
8. Need more options suitable for grass-based farming systems.

GWCT vision for future support

The GWCT vision for the future of farming support in England seeks to address these issues (see GWCT publication "Farming through Brexit: a vision for the future"). It proposes a Foundation Scheme payment recognising that certain cross-compliance requirements are statutory and deliver public benefit at a cost to the farmer e.g. hedgerow management. Removing the single farm payment (and its associated cross compliance requirements) means there would be no incentive for farmers to observe these vital statutory requirements that deliver important ecosystem services. The alternative is an increased inspection regime – something we want to move away from.

The inspection regime is a significant area of concern and criticism of the current scheme. As 70% of farms are inspected by UKAS-registered inspectors as part of farm assurance, these independent inspectors could be trained to cover cross-compliance and ELM aspects under any future regulatory framework thereby reducing the need for multiple visits. Any farmers not signed up to ELM or farm assurance would be inspected by the RPA (or equivalent).

Notes from the broader discussion

1. Who qualifies for the subsidy and what should be paid for?
 - a. GWCT vision is for Foundation Scheme payments to be tapered according to farm size (justified by larger farms having efficiencies of scale). Capping is undesirable as people will devise avoidance strategies.
 - b. Any environmental packages should be open to all, with the rationale for support related to "the more you do, the more you get paid".
 - c. Delivering environmental benefits as a public good has a cost so farmer/land manager needs incentive.
 - d. The Foundation Scheme would replace the basic farm payment which for many farms is a vital aspect of their viability. This would ensure that farmers are paid for basic environmental goods that can be valued. There is concern that many relatively small, mixed farms will lose out in the new era of public money for public goods without some form of "basic support" – the GWCT has used the term the "missed middle". There was a general consensus in the room that some form of basic farm support was desirable.
2. Need for focus on soil management.
 - a. Concerns expressed about degrading of soils particularly in Grade 1 areas where land is rented to the highest bidder who maximises output without managing for soil quality, as seen as a cost.
 - b. GWCT promotes need for sustainable rotations (as opposed to the ill-fated 3 crop rule which sought to address this) which involves growing exploitative and restorative crops in rotation.
 - c. Discussion identified a need for a review of restrictions on spreading product classified as "waste" on farmland when its application has benefits to soil.

- d. Need for focus on grassland options such as promotion of diverse swards but these are less productive so need to be included in ELM.
3. Concerns about the rental sector not supporting investment in farm infrastructure and soil quality – and not an area being debated much in the context of Brexit. GWCT advocating a Capital Grants Scheme which would help tenant farmers invest in changes to farm infrastructure/systems necessary to comply with the new ‘environmental era’. The person who does the work should get the reward rather than the landlord. However not a black and white case as some landlords such as the National Trust do provide benefits to their tenants.
4. Succession and the attraction of new entrants. Various aspects were considered including impact on lack of investment, impact on number of small farms and threat of increasing size of farm holdings, lack of opportunities for new entrants, farm management driven by “external” factors (such as prescriptive scheme options) and burden of family farm succession.
5. Need to view the farm holistically and to include woodland.
6. Appropriate training and advice for farmers important not only for delivery of biodiversity but also woodland management.
7. Concerns about land values being driven by alternative management such as biofuel and forestry (heavily subsidised in Scotland). Growing maize for fuel also disastrous for soil – hence need for sustainable rotations within environmental compliance.

The meeting was brought to a close by the APPG vice-Chair, who in summarising noted that the discussion had demonstrated the complexity of the debate around farming and its future post-CAP and that once the Agriculture Bill is released for discussion, there will be a need to avoid polarising of the debate as this would not be constructive.

12th September 2018