

# Obligations and opportunities

Get into ELS now before Natural England raises the bar

Good farmers know that to look after their profits they need to protect their natural resources, writes Anthony Weston of Complete Land Management Ltd.

Now you must sign up to entry level stewardship (ELS) to get some of your modulated subsidy back; you must jump through all the higher level stewardship (HLS) hoops to get paid for the flock of lapwing on your farm rather than the flock of sheep.

If you want to plough up a piece of grassland you may well need an environmental impact assessment. If you want to develop the infrastructure of your farm, build a new farm house, shop or stables the local planning authority will require an environmental statement. All of these environmental considerations have beneficial financial outcomes in the end, but keeping track of your obligations is becoming harder and harder.

Thanks to Government targets, statistics and in no small part their computer systems, keeping up to date with your farms environmental responsibilities and opportunities

from waste exemption licenses to bio fuels, is now as much part of running a farm as movement licences and pesticide records.

Natural England estimates that 40% of eligible land in the South East is now in ELS and they are determined to drive this up to 60% within the next few months. It is perhaps surprising that there have not been more ELS agreements; ELS funding is probably one of the safest parts of DEFRA's budget.

Things are not so rosy for HLS. DEFRA's budgetary issues look set to turn HLS into an invitation only scheme. The thing to remember about invitations is that you have to know the right people to get one.

The early adopters of ES are already reaping the rewards of the scheme with payments coming far more readily than SFP. There are however other grants to consider.

Under the banner England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) the Forestry Commission launched a suite of six separate schemes in 2005 and although in a similar position to DEFRA in terms of tight budgets

there is certainly scope to obtain funding towards woodland management. Now is the time to start preparing for these schemes particularly if you have more than 30 ha and want to apply for a woodland management grant (WMG).

Woodland entered in EWGS must now meet Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification which means drawing up a management plan to the UK Woodland Assurance Standard (UKWAS). Preparing this plan now and getting certified will mean you are ready to apply for EWGS funding this autumn. It will also mean that if you are interested in the growing bio fuels sector your produce will be FSC certified.

It is clear that environmental management does not just mean environmental stewardship but overlaps with other income streams and importantly marketing. This is particularly true of the organic sector. Organic entry level stewardship (OELS) conversion payments of £175/ha are incentive enough for some farms; for others the prospect of getting £60/ha rather than £30/ha from ELS across the whole estate is attractive. The last six months has seen a growing interest in organic certification. The decision to convert to organic production should not be taken lightly. It demands dedication to record keeping. However many farms are well suited to this type of production and its potential for better marketing.

Estates now have environmental income from a variety of sources, but keeping up to date with obligations is increasingly important. The last six months has seen the development of complete farm image (visit [farmimage.co.uk](http://farmimage.co.uk) for a demonstration) a simple user friendly tool for keeping track of obligations on the ground. This makes the management of each scheme easier. It ensures correct management helping to safeguard your payments.

Whatever scheme, rule or regulation is applied to farming it is inextricably linked to the environment. Make sure you keep on top of your obligations and opportunities.

Potential development sites may require Environmental Surveys for bats and other protected species



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