

Although it seems likely that the Single Payment Scheme (SPS) will stay until 2014 the impending Spending Review and talk of Natural England losing up to a 6th of its staff and 40% of its budget make for uncertain times. However the EU continues to make encouraging noises about the future of rural support.

Many Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA), Countryside Stewardship (CSS) and Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) agreements are now nearing their end, but even in these uncertain times it is crucial that we address these renewals, in order to avoid a deficit to annual income.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) has recognised the shortcomings of its predecessors in order to maximise environmental benefits and while it provides the chance for farmers to enjoy a serious boost to annual income, it is not 'money for old rope'. Farmland birds, historic landscape, resource protection, archaeology and public access are all part of Natural England's agenda, and with a broader spectrum of objectives comes a wider suite of options.

As a result HLS can be tailored to your individual farm, whether that be location, soil type, cropping, stocking or personal ambitions. But putting together a comprehensive new scheme inevitably takes time.

By the time you read this, CLM will have submitted 27 applications across central and southern England since January. However some of these schemes have taken months of careful planning and negotiation to come to fruition.

It is looking increasingly likely that there will be one annual application deadline and one annual payment in the future for Environmental Stewardship in line with SPS. This does not mean that you can sit on your hands until the spring and put something together in a last minute rush. One particular application, serves to illustrate the need to allow time for the whole process.

HLS – buried treasure?

Case study: Manor Farm, Oxfordshire

Manor Farm is a family run mixed arable and livestock farm of 200ha. Soil type ranges from light sand and gravel through to clay cap and alluvium water meadows.

There is a modest private shoot, which makes use of the 25ha broadleaf woodland.

Since September 2000 the farm has been managed under CSS, along with the ELS Scheme since 2005. The two schemes combined contributed approximately £12,000 per annum.

In July 2009 I started work to initiate an application for HLS, aiming to commence following the expiry of their CSS in October 2010. The brief was to maintain the current habitats found on the farm, while sustaining existing stewardship income.

The Farm Environment Plan (FEP) was undertaken over the summer of 2009 (the optimum time to survey the meadows) and highlighted the most important features and opportunities. Proposals for management were drawn up on the basis of these findings and soon after prescriptions were agreed for species-rich meadows, ancient woodland and arable options, to the satisfaction of both the family and Natural England. The archaeology however proved a little more contentious.

The Historic Environment Record produced by the County Archaeologist identified a complex network of historic features spread over a large area of the farm, under a range of cropping. To many this would raise alarm bells at the thought of reverting the farms best arable

land. The choice lies with the farmer and considering that Natural England reserve a payment of £460/ha for reversion of features of the highest importance, this can often be an easy decision to make.

With the farmer on side to discuss relevant archaeological options, the ball was in the court of Natural England and English Heritage to decide upon which features they deemed to be most important and worthy of this higher rate of payment. This however proved to be less than straightforward due to the nature and complexity of the features.

It was decided that in order to differentiate between allocation of the £460/ha option (arable reversion for archaeology) or the £210/ha option (creation of grassland for target features), geophysical surveys and trench methods would be employed to analyse the risk of plough damage. This work was carried out by two separate bodies and funded at 100% cost by Natural England. In total ten trenches were opened up over two areas. Among the findings were a number of ditches, pits, post holes, a round house and a Roman cremation burial.

The 'Time Team' approach appealed to the farmer, especially when fully funded. This process did however take time and a year on from the Farm Environment Plan being carried out, the application has finally been submitted with the approval of the farmer, Natural England and English Heritage, which will see the farm's stewardship income increase from £12,000pa to £30,000pa.

A secure future?

There are many question marks hanging over the future of rural support; but the imminent spending

review is a call to action not an excuse to "wait and see". Know your options and plan how to safeguard your income; whether its digging for history or ploughing for food.



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