

There is always an excuse to put things off. But that's how opportunities get missed. Write CLM's Anthony Weston. Most people would recognise this as part of the human condition – just like being adverse to change. So why then would the policy wallers in Defra and Natural England want to give people another excuse for not entering Environmental Stewardship? Just when the message was starting to get through that NE has plenty of cash to spend they go and start fiddling with "set aside".

Any old excuse



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of extra annual income for 350 lucky farmers in the South East over and above any ELS income). They also have £4 million to spend on adding capital works to existing agreements. In the year 08/09 NE struggled to drum up enough interest to meet its target of 190 new HLS agreements in the South East.

Fortunately for us in the South East local NE officers are more pragmatic than their muddle-headed policy colleagues. They know that

it's up to them to make sure that the money gets spent in a cost effective way and more importantly they realise that they have to accommodate the difficult decisions that farmers must make about entering ELS.

The point remains that the money – all £6.4million of it – is there for the taking. Forget all the bluster and posturing of policy makers, HLS is still a matter of weighing up the costs and benefits of locking into a guaranteed income stream for 10 years. If your scheme is well thought through and importantly delivers enough annual income you needn't be put off entering HLS by set aside or any other old excuse come to that.

In 2003 Defra launched the ELS pilot scheme and when the scheme was adopted nationally in 2005 the RSPB lauded it as the saviour of farmland birds – indeed they did more than that, they basically said ELS was their idea and their design. I think it is pretty fair to say that the farming community has got over the inertia initially experienced when ELS and HLS were launched. But it seems the RSPB and the policy department of NE fail to see that by meddling with "set aside" – a system that Defra admits has "unclear" benefits – they will only alienate those that they rely on to deliver their targets for a healthy countryside – I mean you.

A recent report suggests that only 60% of farmers that took part in the ELS pilot in 2003 have signed up for another five years. Next summer will see the first crop of non-pilot ELS schemes up for renewal. Surely the ivory tower dwellers must recognise that putting farmers off ELS could have a much bigger impact than the removal of set aside. And it's not just ELS that is in jeopardy; the much more targeted and environmentally more valuable HLS scheme may also suffer.

All this comes at a time when NE has more money than ever to pay farmers for environmental goods. To be precise they have £6.4million to spend in 09/10 on HLS alone in the South East. They are aiming for 350 new HLS agreements in the coming year (that's an average of £18k

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Environmental Stewardship creates opportunities for farmland birds and farmers: In this picture HLS wildbird seed plot (£475/ha/pa) HLS reedbed creation (£380/ha/pa) and in the background ELS low input grassland



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