



Raising water levels to suit over-wintering birds means a reduced grazing season, but HLS payments more than make up for it, reckons Martin Hole.

## Benefits there if you compromise

Environmental schemes are there for farmers' benefit, but you have to accept it may change farming practice

By Jonathan Long

Marrying environmental aims and farming needs can be tricky, but to make the most of the opportunities offered by the Higher Level Scheme (HLS) compromise is essential.

As one of the first farmers in England to be granted an HLS agreement and having had many previous environmental agreements, including those for Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Sussex sheep and beef producer Martin Hole is well aware of the difficulties faced in farming to suit environmental needs.

"There is no doubt we have adapted our system to suit the environmental schemes available; there is no point trying to continue farming as you always have done. You have to change and make the most of the opportunities available."

As such, Mr Hole has radically altered both his enterprises to en-

sure they can be run profitably in tandem with the environmental agreements in place at Mootage Farm, Haslemere.

The sheep enterprise, based on the local Romney breed, has evolved over the years to become a low-input system. "Our grassland is largely low yielding marshland, so we need a sheep which can cope with relatively poor quality grazing and no supplementary feeding."

With the farm converted to organic production, most stock are marketed through a local wholesaler to butchers and other high quality outlets. "This means we need a high quality product to offer and rely on terminal sire breeds to provide an extra quality element to stock."

The breed of choice is Texel, although Mr Hole admits this may change as easy-lambing sires become more difficult to source. And a change of ewe breed may be on the cards as the need for a slightly handier animal comes to the fore. "I'm considering a North Country Cheviat x Romney ewe to provide a tougher ewe base for the flock."

And, in a change to policy, all cattle are now finished on the farm on largely forage-based diets. "We manage to finish about 70% of them without any concentrates, although the rest receive some organic concentrates to finish them."

With HLS and previous environmental schemes dictating that much of the farm's marshland has to be managed as rough grassland, silage quality is lower than many farms may accept. But with suckler cows to feed, this crop is easily sold.

"Finishing cattle are fed silage from better ground, while suckler cows are content with poorer silage coming off rougher marsh land."

HLS options taken up include promoting nesting wading birds, over-wintering wildfowl and heritage rich meadows.

"The nesting wading birds and over-wintering wildfowl mean we have to raise water levels on much of the marshland for winter. While this isn't a big problem, it does mean we have to house cattle for longer than before, meaning we have had to invest in cattle buildings in recent years."

But Mr Hole believes the environmental payments available have more than made up for the investment required. "HLS is earning us about £100/acre, so the changes are more than worthwhile."

This option also reduces the

amount of land available to winter sheep over, so while most can remain at home, some have to be sent away to keep on other organic farms.

The farm's higher, drier ground is reserved for finishing lambs in autumn and early winter, before being rested ready for lambing in late March.

And it is this integrated sheep and cattle system which gives the flexibility needed to provide the habitats that earn HLS payments. "We can alter sward heights to suit nesting birds by grazing with either cattle or sheep or both."

"While nesting birds like a cover of grass, they don't want it too long. Tight grazing can be employed to produce the ideal sward for them, without doing detriment to animal performance," he says.

Livestock health also has to be guarded and increased water levels can lead to fluke. But this has always affected the farm, so treatment regimes have changed little.

But Mr Hole is the first to admit that HLS is not suitable for every farm. "It requires a big change in attitude to make the scheme work. The rewards are there and it can work in conjunction with profitable farming, but only when you want it to."

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### HIGH LEVEL SCHEME

- Needs attitude shift
- Manage stock to suit
- Payments offset investments