

It is easy to berate the 'powers that be' for their inability to listen to the farming community. Perhaps after two years in the job the secretary of state thought it was about time to listen to the people on the ground. Hilary Benn's announcement of 9 July comes as a surprise. Whilst the decision to follow a voluntary approach to replacing set-aside makes sense for a number of reasons, this by no means guaranteed that Defra would have the same opinion.

The proposal put forward by the NFU and CLA as a replacement for set aside, aptly titled the Campaign for the Farmed Environment, will give farmers the flexibility to produce the crops the market desires in addition to providing the environmental benefits that many perceive to have been lost with the death of set-aside. Thanks must go to the NFU, CLA and GWCT for managing to make themselves heard as we all know lobbying the government for sensible policy decisions is frequently fruitless.

Of course as the Campaign for the Farmed Environment is a voluntary agreement it needs to be seen to meet a number of targets in order to avoid the government's alternative 'regulatory approach' being imposed. The targets are firstly to double the uptake of Entry Level Stewardship 'in field options' to cover 40,000 hectares on top of current levels, secondly increase uncropped land by 20,000 hectares from January 2008 levels and thirdly to introduce voluntary measures on other land covering between 30,000 to 50,000 hectares. Importantly this agreement does not include setting aside a fixed proportion of each arable farm's area. This solution must not be seen as an easy ride or a cop out.

According to Defra's statistics there was approximately 274,700ha of unproductive set aside in 2007 of which it is estimated in excess of 50% was returned to cropping in 2008. Much of this land was put into wheat in reaction to the golden prices cereal farmers experienced for a few months in 2007. Many of these ex set aside fields were originally set aside as they were the poorer

# Set-aside, it's your choice!

yielding fields on the farm. With tighter margins these fields can perhaps be put back to more profitable environmental use.

The first ELS agreements are due for renewal in August 2010 with 24,000 agreements up for renewal before August 2011.

The crunch will come in 12 months time – will those ELS agreements be renewed? Many of you who farm arable and mixed farms will have scored a significant proportion of your ELS points using the management plan options that are no longer available. On renewal where will you find those missing points? Those fields that continue to eat lime and fertiliser whilst producing

poor returns could be used to generate ELS points and thus contribute towards avoiding the threat of a regulatory system. An ELS wild bird seed mix or pollen and nectar plot generating £450/ha/pa will struggle to beat the gross margin produced by a first wheat on prime arable land. However these ELS options will probably provide a better return compared with a conventional arable rotation on a poor field, particularly after the pigeons have taken their fill from the winter rape.

The second aim of the voluntary agreement is likely to be met through Higher Level

Stewardship. With twice as much money to spend compared to last year Natural England is keen to discuss upgrading CSS and ESA agreements to HLS in addition to schemes for farms never previously involved in stewardship.

The third target is the introduction of voluntary measures on other land covering between 30,000 to 50,000 hectares. What exactly does this mean? The original proposal used this section to promote the environmental benefits of management measures such as over winter stubbles, grass buffers alongside water courses and rotational fallow whether these be part of a stewardship scheme or on a completely voluntary basis. Game covers are also likely to count. Whatever the outcome this facet of the voluntary approach provides scope for farmers not interested in Environmental Stewardship to do their bit. However if you are willing to put areas aside voluntarily then you may as well take a closer look at ELS and HLS and earn some extra cash!

Many will have been putting off applying for ELS or HLS because of the uncertainties surrounding set-aside. However those farmers need delay no longer and are probably best advised to jump on the Stewardship wagon whilst Natural England is flush with cash.

Whatever the outcome you can be assured that nobody will be singing farming's praises should the Campaign for the Farmed Environment succeed. However, failure will

result in a regulatory system, negative press and in the long term will damage the industry's ability to successfully lobby government.

The bar has been set. The question is: will farming respond? The link between environment policy and income from grants continues to strengthen. Environmental Stewardship offers returns that can markedly improve farm incomes so the answer to the voluntary question should be obvious.



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