

The report into a pilot of results-based payments for agri-environment schemes, hot off the press, makes for fascinating reading.

Published last month by Natural England and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, it outlines the findings into a two-year trial featuring 34 farmers across 230ha.

Farmers, so it proclaims, welcomed the freedom to use their local knowledge and expertise to manage, without being told what to do.

In terms of delivering species-rich hay meadows, habitat for breeding waders, providing winter bird food and resources for pollinators, it concludes there is “considerable potential” to improve the performance of agri-environmental measures, and that those participating were almost universally positive about the results-based approach.

“The more that you put in, the more that you get out,” one said. “It directly rewards for skill, effort and care,” another commented.

So far, so good. But there’s a problem. The clock is ticking and I fear DEFRA has rowed back on some of its original ambitions for the much-talked-about, hugely anticipated new Environmental Land Management Scheme.

The pilot recognises some of the challenges of the new approach, compared with the current ‘income-foregone’ basis, including the need for training to support the self-assessment process, the resource required to verify results, and the need to avoid land managers being unfairly exposed to weather-related risks beyond their control.

The current schemes focus largely on biodiversity, so ELMS should be an opportunity to keep the good bits of these while achieving additional benefits through additional payments for wider ecosystem services. DEFRA seems to have gone ominously quiet, however, about payments for measures such as carbon sequestration, improving water quality, providing public access and boosting public health.

To give it credit, DEFRA is trying to engage with the farming community. It asked us, for example, to run a workshop on 8 November at Plumpton College to give farmers the chance to share their thoughts

ACT NOW AS CLOCKS TICK DOWN ON NEW SUPPORT SYSTEM

and opinions on ELMS directly with its test and trials team.

But a lot of farmers, understandably, are suffering from consultation fatigue, or perhaps have lost faith in the preparedness of the powers-that-be to actually listen. DEFRA, some say, has already got clear ideas about the new system and is merely paying lip-service to the notion of consultation.

What I’m seeing at present is a polarisation of views among farmers. Some are throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the Countryside Stewardship scheme, viewing it as offering decent payments and much-needed certainty in an uncertain world. Others are balking at the idea of getting tied into an agreement, hoping a better offer might come along and preferring to remain commercially nimble.

The aim, however, must be to devise and implement a policy that means stewardship measures are an integral part of most, if not all, farming businesses.

Creating a two-tier system – where some areas focus on food production and others are put in the environmental ‘box’ – isn’t desirable. That’s now how the countryside works. Take the South Downs, for example, where traditional mixed farms produce wonderful, grass-fed red meat, top-notch arable crops and take advantage of the stewardship opportunities associated with that unique landscape. These are businesses that delivers on many counts simultaneously: food production, wildlife, access and public health, to name just four.

As we wait for clarity, it’s important to understand

how your BPS income is likely to decline between now and 2027. You can also weigh up the pros and cons of either extending an existing environmental stewardship scheme or applying for a new CS scheme.

In tandem with this, consider what natural resources, alongside your farm produce, you have potentially available to ‘sell’? Are you, for example, in an area where a water company is offering farmers payments to reduce nitrogen inputs to lower groundwater nitrate levels? How much woodland or grassland do you have, and what are the ecosystem services they provide? You might not be able to monetise these immediately, but hopefully soon you will.

It’s also worth taking the time to get engaged with the design of ELMS. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to improve how we support farmers and deliver for the environment – to fashion a system where efficient food production and positive environmental stewardship go hand-in-hand across the country.

Right now, we need reports like the one just published to be more than just fascinating reading – we need them to be followed through into action and policy by government.

ANTHONY WESTON
Director, CLM

T: 01892 770339

🐦 @anthonyweston

www.c-l-m.co.uk



- Basic Payment Scheme
- Farm and Estate Management
- Farm Business Consultancy
- Rent Reviews
- Countryside Stewardship
- Ecological Surveys



Call us on **01892 770339** or email info@c-l-m.co.uk
www.c-l-m.co.uk