

MARSH WARS - A NEW HOPE

I noticed quite recently that an email I received from a member of staff at Natural England gave their job title in the signature at the bottom as a member of the Field Unit; a group so secret that most Natural England advisers I have asked since reading about it do not even know of their existence. This Field Unit I surmised, possibly correctly, was the same highly trained group of individuals who had recently undertaken a 'Rapid Field Visit' across a block of marshland on the Thames Estuary. All this painted a picture of some kind of crack unit of ecological storm troopers performing a blitzkrieg, in this instance at least, across the marshes of North Kent with wave after wave of brightly kagooled types with their nose to the turf assessing sward length (but at the same time, obviously, taking great care not to crush any waders' nests underfoot).

While all of the above may appear to be rather more in the Herr Flick/Captain Mainwaring camp than, say, any one of a number of somewhat more serious televisual offerings on the subject this belies the fact that it is something that ought to be taken really quite seriously. Many have become familiar with the periodic visitation by the RPA Inspectorate and there has been no shortage of horror stories after such visits involving, for instance, minor indiscretions being

magnified over the life of a 10 year agreement into something to lose sleep over.

Those RPA inspections will tend to focus on areas and measurements of options which, in the case, of rotational options on tillage, have their own issues to consider. However, these new Rapid Field Visits appear to be more focussed on the basics of prescription delivery which can, at the best of times, drift from the black and white of GPS derived area measurements towards altogether far greyer areas. For instance, they may come and measure the length of the sward and whilst we think we have an idea of how long a sward may be, normally in relation to the ideal lengths for cattle and sheep utilisation, I would wager that quite a significant proportion of those asked would struggle to identify correctly the sward lengths stipulated in their agreements.

If, in the case of higher tier schemes, you've made a point of negotiating the right set of prescriptions for your land and, following that, not only made equally sure that you are actually complying with them but have also recorded that fact (either photographically or in a farm diary) then you should be able to sit tight in your dugout and let the kagooled hordes pass over your head safe in the knowledge that all is well.

The above tale is just the sort of thing that has, at least in part I suspect, driven Mr Gove to recently

bemoan the administration of the scheme and announce the simplification of the mid tier of CSS which has involved the introduction of four new offers as well as the bringing forward of submission deadlines to the end of July – you have been warned! These new offers have the distinct advantage of being, rather like ELS was, non competitive; the theory being that this will remove one of the significant barriers to uptake that have blighted CSS to date. However, while it might be tempting to think that the non competitive route is the proverbial no brainer it is important not to forget that you may be doing yourself out of the opportunity for some meaningful capital works as well as the chance to put together a scheme that contains the best suite of annual options for your farm. This may especially be the case if you have been in an ELS scheme for the last 10 years and have been starved of access to grant funding for things such as new fencing.

Conversely there is no doubt that it is quite possible to construct a scheme that is fiendishly complicated in the relentless pursuit of higher returns which might leave you potentially susceptible to the deprecations of the aforementioned crack squad. I would suggest that as, to date, the scheme has effectively been non competitive anyway, one would do well to at least consider the middle way rather than make an application at the two extreme ends of the spectrum.

► Brent geese feeding on the marshes of the Thames Estuary



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