

## ONE EYE ON THE DETAIL

While we gaze thoughtfully in to the future anticipating the opportunities and pitfalls that Brexit might throw our way it would appear that those in government, and more particularly in Defra, are not doing the same. No surprise there I hear you say? George Eustice confirmed just weeks ago that the government has not commissioned any research in the past six months to inform agricultural policy once the UK leaves the EU. Rather than speculating on the farming industry's prospects post Brexit I would prefer to focus, for the time being at least, on those that await you in 2017. After all, to ensure that a business is best placed to prosper in a world devoid of the Common Agricultural Policy, that business needs to keep at least one eye on the detail of the here and now.

Focusing first on BPS we are now in the third year of this scheme and it is 15 years since cross compliance in its first guise was introduced. The uninitiated could be forgiven for thinking that submitting a claim and remaining compliant does not require a second thought. There is no avoiding the fact that the value of a BPS claim can be eroded in a huge number of ways should you fall victim to the dreaded RPA inspection. However it is often the simple things that can cause big issues. Three issues which I have come across in the last twelve months and which are more common than you might think are as follows.

1. I have heard of two farm businesses who forgot to submit BPS claims in 2016, neither of these claims

were small both being considerable five figure sums. Cue very heated family discussions regarding an early introduction to farming post Brexit?

2. A farmer who claimed on land farmed and claimed by somebody else in 2016, a dual claim in the RPA's book of penalties. The reason for this dual claim; the party in the wrong had grazed the land up until three years ago and had not removed the field from his claim since then. A simple oversight or a wanton act of fraud? Either way a risky business bearing in mind the penalties that the RPA can apply. You will be delighted to hear that the RPA are in the process of completing yet another digital mapping update exercise based on the latest Ordnance Survey and aerial photography. We have already noticed that changes to field boundaries that we have requested and had been made over the last two years have been undone overnight and that random fields have been added to clients' maps. While nothing may have changed on the ground since last year it will certainly be worth your while checking your maps and claim form before merrily pressing submit only to find out in December that you have claimed on a Duchy tenant's field in Cornwall!
3. A farm where the contractor drilled maize right up to the hedge blindly ignoring the two metre cross compliance margin that has been in place since 2005. Whether it is just 50m of margin or 5000m the RPA will apply a percentage

penalty to a BPS claim and any agri environment payments due that year.

I am sure none of South East Farmer's readers will be guilty of these mistakes but hopefully they help to convey my theme. Just because a task or action is completed annually does not mean that it should be treated with complacency particularly when it delivers to the vast majority of farms the difference between profit and loss.

The same theory should be applied to existing stewardship agreements, those in the final year of their agreement are more than likely to receive a visit from the RPA. Where areas of management options do not measure up, penalties are now back dated to the start of the agreement resulting in sizeable fines. An afternoon spent checking the size of your wild bird seed plots and the width of your margins is time well spent giving you the opportunity to reinstate the bits that your contractor has nibbled away.

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme continues to receive its fair share of negative press but it is a prospect that should not be ignored. The scheme offers the opportunity to lock into a secure income stream for five years thus providing a source of income post the anticipated 2020 cliff edge.

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