

As I walked out one midsummer morning

It might be tempting to think that the CLM article was transforming into a Laurie Lee book review column. What I am actually alluding to is that at some stage (not necessarily in mid-summer although it may be marginally more pleasant then), it's always good to get out and about to make sure that things on the ground are all as they should be.

One of the aspects of NE/RPA/Defra bureaucracy that seem to be getting increasingly complicated is that of the wonderfully termed permanent ineligible features (or PIFs for short). These have been rearing their ugly heads on the SPS stage for a few years now but still continue to cause a good deal of consternation with areas such as scrub and open water being deducted from the eligible area. Very often the RPA will have mapped these areas out following an inspection or, in a more Orwellian manner, through the use of satellite imagery. However, just because your RPA maps happen to have a few of these PIFs marked on them do not make the mistake of thinking that this means that all the ineligible features are accounted for – it is quite possible that there could be more just waiting to cause you all sorts of financial bother into the future.

As an example of this, holdings in areas which contain a good deal of ditches and drains may have been gaily claiming on the entire area of the field as given on the RLR without realising that because some of the ditches are over 4m wide they should have been deducted from the



total area. Over larger expanses of marshland this 4m can add up to quite a substantial figure and this could well be compounded significantly if, as they invariably do, the RPA decide to backdate any reclaim to previous years.

In a similar vein, small blocks of woodland and scrub (especially long narrow boundary features) regularly take up space in field parcels and can add up to a considerable and potentially punitive acreage on many holdings.

This backdating exercise, which is liable to be quite painful enough with respect to Pillar 1 schemes, will in all probability be extended to any current ELS or HLS agreements. Even if you have been really quite studious and ensured that all non-eligible land is excluded from your SPS claims thus far there is no guarantee that NE, especially in the early years of environmental stewardship, would have taken the same approach. I have more or less lost count of the number of HLS agreements where whole sweeps of downland are receiving £200/ha payments

regardless of the fact that much of it is impenetrable scrub and, therefore, not considered eligible for payment under current guidance. Addressing these anomalies now rather than waiting for an RPA inspector to do so may mean a considerable saving in the long run and mean that you avoid the inevitable delay in receiving scheme payments that problems found during an inspection result in.

Those who have got ELS or HLS schemes due to end in 2016 (or, in the case of some ELS agreements, late 2015) will need to start thinking quite soon about what options are available when their scheme ends. Although detail is currently lacking we do know that the new scheme (to be called Countryside Stewardship) will have two main tiers with the higher tier being comparable to the current HLS while the lower tier will be more akin to its name-sake's previous incarnation.

Both tiers will be competitive and regardless of whether you are in ELS or HLS at present you are going to have to prove the poten-

tial value of any future scheme in order to attract funding. Those in HLS will be judged according to how well options have performed against the Indicators of Success set out by their Natural England adviser. Therefore a dusting down of the relevant agreement documents prior to opening negotiations with NE would definitely be a good idea. Have you really got all those weird and wonderful plants growing/birds breeding and what does all this stuff about them being 'frequent' or 'occasional' actually mean in English?

So, as you drive out one mid-winter morning later this month take time to look at the land in relation to both its eligibility for Basic Payment Scheme and the opportunities that may arise in the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme; it may be time very well spent.



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