

Countryside stewardship mid tier is worth the effort

2015 has been a testing year for everyone involved with subsidy applications. The Basic Payment Scheme trial lasted longer than expected, now we are just waiting on the RPA to process the applications in time for December payments! If there is a year we need them on time this is it.

More recently attention has turned to the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). With Expressions of Interest for the 2016 Higher Tier scheme already submitted attention has concentrated on 2016 Mid Tier applications which must be submitted by the 30th September.

To help unravel the perceived complexities Natural England's Charlie Chantler agreed to meet us for an invaluable question and answer session, some of his tips are summarised here.

Q: Who can make an application for the 2016 Mid Tier scheme?

A: Any farmer or land owner with land not currently in an existing ELS or HLS scheme or where a current scheme expires before the 31st December 2015.

Q: What is the starting point of the process?

A: Upon receipt of an applica-



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Charlie Chantler and Kevin Jay

tion pack start by identifying the scheme targets at a farm level by consulting the Statement of Priorities for your area and the Targeting Priorities Map both of which can be found online at .gov.uk. Choose management options that deliver the local priorities for your farm and fit your farming system. It is important to remember that the scheme is competitive the more targets you can deliver the greater your chances of success.

Q: How long does an agreement last?

A: A Mid Tier agreement will last for five years always starting on 1st January.

Q: What are the scheme's objectives?

A: Specific priorities have been identified for all land in England focusing on criteria to include: biodiversity, water quality, flood management, providing year round habitat and feed resources for wildlife and protecting historical features such as scheduled monuments and archaeological remains. On many farms it will be possible to deliver just as much through a Mid-Tier agreement as it is through the Higher Tier.

Q: How is the payment structured?

A: Mid Tier is not like ELS, there is no flat rate payment. Each specific option carries a sepa-

rate payment rate, usually area based, with payments being made on an annual basis.

Q: Does the whole farm need to be entered?

A: No. Mid Tier is a parcel based scheme.

Q: What is the "Wild Pollinator and Farm Wildlife Package"?

A: This bundle of options is designed to provide 'year-round' habitats for pollinators and farmland birds and offer associated benefits to other farm wildlife such as rare arable plants, bats and brown hares. Applications including these options, and meeting the minimum 3% threshold will be more competitive and are more likely to lead to an agreement offer.

Q: How much will the scheme generate per year?

A: This varies on the management options selected. Options and areas chosen should be guided by the priorities highlighted for the Farm and the best fit with your farming system. Schemes must generate at least £1,000 per annum.

Q: Are there any capital payments available?

A: Yes and personally I think this is one of the benefits of the new scheme. Applications can include payments for works such as planting new hedges, fencing and pond management.

Stand-alone capital works agreements will also be available in the New Year.

Q: How is an application assessed?

A: Natural England will use a scoring system which considers how effectively the proposed scheme meets the target priorities and also considers the financial cost. This will determine it's "value for money".

Q: What if an application fails?

A: There will be not be an opportunity to amend an application but applicants may re-apply in the following year.

The application process is not as straight forward as ELS and Natural England is not expecting a high number of applications this autumn. But with a little thought, and a fair helping of patience, it is possible to devise a scheme which can balance commercial farming with significant environmental benefits and simultaneously provide income at least equivalent to ELS, in some cases more. The difference between Mid and Higher Tier is not as distinct as between ELS and HLS, it is entirely possible for a Mid Tier agreement to generate a similar level of income and environmental benefit. Therefore if you think that you have missed the Higher Tier boat then Mid Tier is definitely worth exploring.

For understandable reasons many prefer to let others act as guinea pigs. But because this is brand new, and Natural England have a budget that needs to be spent, there may be no better time to apply than this autumn. It is said that the early bird catches the worm, which seems to be exactly what this scheme is about!



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