

There has been much talk recently about the government's Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI).

Billed as a 'stepping stone' scheme for English farmers, bridging the 2022-2024 gap ahead of the introduction of the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS), it hit the headlines in September.

DEFRA Secretary of State George Eustice has, however, been making reference to an SFI for some time.

Even as far back as February, he told the NFU conference he envisaged a three-tier ELM scheme, the first part of which would be a "sustainable farming incentive". It would, he said, be open to all and encourage farm-level measures such as integrated pest management, sensitive hedgerow management and soil health.

Following this, he suggested, would be a local environment tier which would incentivise work such as habitat creation, tree planting and natural flood management. Finally, there would be a landscape-scale tier supporting endeavours such as woodland creation, peatland restoration and other land use changes.

Having been working with clients to help them make up the cash shortfall they're facing as a result of the phasing out of BPS, the news of an interim scheme is on first impression to be welcomed. Anything that fills this 'hungry gap' has to be good news.

But one can't help question the logic of introducing yet another new scheme, especially for such a short period. Let's face it, DEFRA's record on launching and running new schemes is hardly exemplary.

Plus, the Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme, which is already up and running, could easily be adjusted to attract a wider take-up ahead of a full-scale ELMS launch.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, why not tweak CS to enable more existing and new options to be added to current agreements, such as offering payments for carbon storage? This would bring additional environmental benefits and get more cash to farmers. Win-win.

The difficulty at present is that HLS agreements expire partway through the year and CS starts on 1 January, so there is a break in funding. Also,

'STEPPING-STONE' SUPPORT WELCOME

But let's not reinvent the wheel

farmers already in CS are not able to add options to their current schemes. Simply permitting additions to existing agreements and transfers from HLS to CS would solve these problems, though.

After all, CS has many measures that fit well with modern farming (such as herbal leys and legume fallows) and DEFRA has provided several ways to engage with it, through mid-tier, higher tier and wildlife offers. Those looking to apply next year will have a broad range of options to help them make up the BPS shortfall, as well as derive environmental and agronomic benefit on the ground.

The removal of greening meaning the end of the three-crop rule and environmental focus areas really opens the door to a more imaginative CS scheme.

We're helping clients fill the cash shortfall presented by the disappearance of BPS in all manner of ways; everything from introducing new agricultural enterprises and diversifications to accessing new grants and implementing cost-cutting measures.

There are some great opportunities, particularly in the heavily populated South East, involving property, retail and (looking beyond Covid-19, hard as that is) events. Having so many people on the doorstep can bring problems such as fly-tipping and trespass, but it also creates a huge market. Nonetheless, support of this kind between 2022 and 2024 is much-needed and could make the difference between profit and loss for many farm businesses.

The million dollar question is what the SFI will look like in practice. Giving evidence to Parliament's Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee towards the end of September, George Eustice promised to reveal more later in the year with the

publication of a "route map".

As to whether any such document will have been published by the time you're reading this is anyone's guess. Pushed as to how confident he was that it would be in the public domain by November or December, George Eustice's answer was an enigmatic: "Fairly confident – but I've learnt in this job to under-promise and over-deliver rather than the other way round."

What's important, whether the SFI ultimately ends up as an evolution of existing schemes or something brand new, is that DEFRA needs to learn from previous mistakes.

George Eustice has promised that it will be a transition, reflecting "year-on-year progress to the end state... rather than a big-bang revolution with a new IT system and a brand new system that farmers have to get used to".

Well at least that's something. Heaven help us if we were to get the dreaded beta-testing and soft launches of previous schemes' IT systems, which have all been just euphemisms for poorly thought-through policies and excuses for incomplete systems.

SFI and ELMS policies both have to recognise that a commercially viable farming sector is the backbone of a complex, interconnected, rural socioeconomic 'ecosystem'.

This first iteration, whether it ends up being called the SFI, ELMS Part I or indeed anything else, needs to be light on bureaucracy, simple-to-understand and easy to join.

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