

# 'DIDDLY SQUAT' FLEXIBILITY IN SOME SUPPORT SCHEMES

I've been enjoying watching *Clarkson's Farm*. In fact, I haven't spoken to anyone – even those not involved in agriculture – who hasn't.

Yes, he sometimes acts the fool, but the show convincingly conveys how tough agriculture is and highlights the challenges farmers face – whether that's technical, mechanical, meteorological or bureaucratic.

One scene that particularly struck a chord was the BPS form-filling nightmare he faced because of the variety of crops on Diddly Squat Farm.

The former Top Gear-presenting petrolhead decided, understandably, to grow a range of produce to stock his farm shop's shelves, but soon discovered the difficulties and frustrations in terms of paperwork this brings.

It's sadly an all-too-common occurrence in agriculture – bureaucratically cumbersome support schemes ending up driving decision-making in ways precisely contrary to their aim.

We are in an era of change so, whether it's the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) scheme, the Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI) or the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS), it's vital they're flexible enough not to discourage farmers from doing the things they aim to incentivise.

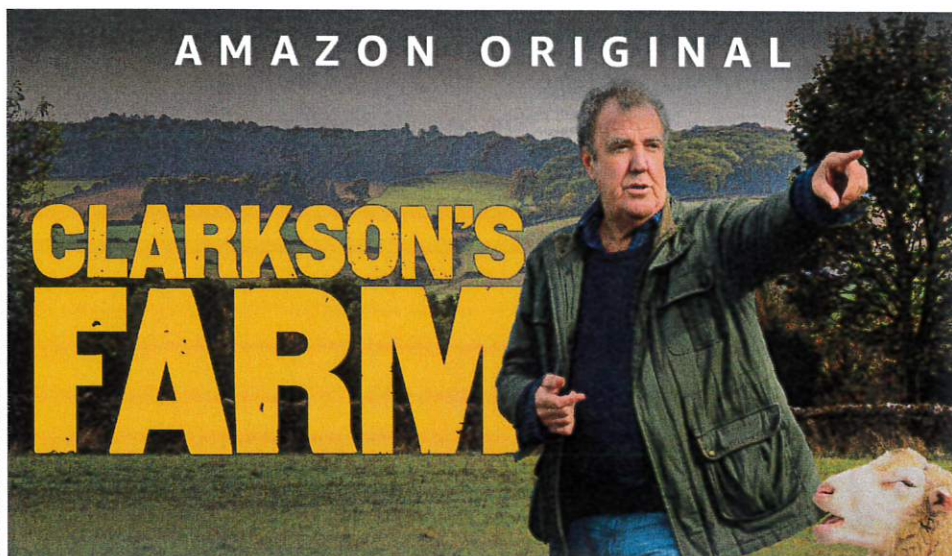
Take Countryside Stewardship. It brings many opportunities, but it's a source of huge frustration that some of the options, though in theory fitting well into regenerative agriculture systems, are simply impractical once you delve into the detail and the eligibility requirements.

As our understanding of regenerative agriculture grows, as the science and technology supporting it evolves, so farmers need the flexibility to alter and fine-tune their approaches. But it's impossible to be agile and responsive to new ideas and knowledge if you've got one hand tied behind your back.

The watchword is flexibility. Those embarking on regenerative agriculture don't want to – or can't – commit to, for example, five years of delivering a set area of an exactly prescribed mix of herbal leys.

DEFRA and all policymakers need to listen more to – and involve – those on the ground. Schemes shouldn't be driven by distant, unrealistic, impractical ideology or the needs of IT systems. They need farmer input.

To be fair, the new FiPL scheme – which will bring opportunities in AONBs such as the High Weald or National Parks like the South Downs – does appear to be trying to address this. A panel, consisting



mainly of farmers, will decide which projects (based partly on DEFRA guidance) are funded.

It's also why the recent Groundswell event in Hertfordshire was so encouraging to be involved in. It felt like a real grassroots movement; farmers taking the lead and running their own event, focused on knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning.

Too many events these days are clouded by vested interests and industry politics. Groundswell was simply a place to learn and to share learning. And that's how, when it comes to running more profitable businesses and looking after the environment, we'll get better.

The event reminded me that regenerative agriculture is not an 'all or nothing' concept. Those practising it are using different methods, to different degrees, with different enterprises on different farms, all under the same banner. Hence why the schemes supporting it must have flexibility at their heart.

As well as having more grassroots input into scheme design and management, we need more scope for local experts to be involved in decision-making. Let's get away from the 'computer says no' response that has all-too-often blighted decision-making in the past.

A good example is the legume and herb-rich sward option (GS4) under CS. It's appealing for many reasons, but isn't allowed on land with 'historic' or 'archaeological' features. Well, Bronze Age field systems feature across much of the South Downs, so it's automatically precluded in many spots where it might well have no damaging effect

whatsoever as part of a regenerative system.

This means all those opportunities for improving soil organic matter or water retention from having a grass and herb mix in an arable rotation are missed out on. Wouldn't it be sensible to be able to just ask an experienced archaeologist with local knowledge for their opinion on whether direct drilling a particular field with a herbal ley should be allowed?

And while we're on the subject of rules, here's one that I reckon should be immediately implemented. DEFRA policymakers should be made to watch *Clarkson's Farm*. That might bring home to them some of the bureaucratic burdens farmers face and the way cumbersome schemes have the potential to push farmers away from desirable – or even, at times, logical – choices when it comes to their businesses and the environmental outcomes we most want to see.

I've certainly thoroughly enjoyed watching the series with my sons, even if the potty-mouthed presenter sometimes uses language that's a bit unsuitable for younger viewers. There again, sometimes the paperwork in farming is enough to make even the most saintly among us resort to swearing!

A promotional graphic for CLM (Countryside Land Management) featuring a portrait of Anthony Weston. The CLM logo is in a green box on the left. To the right is a black and white portrait of Anthony Weston. Below the portrait is his name and contact information.

**CLM**  
**ANTHONY WESTON**  
T: 01892 770339  
@anthonyweston  
www.c-l-m.co.uk