

COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP CAN BE 'WIN WIN'

There is now more reason than ever to consider entering a Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme, with the long-awaited revision of rates recently announced.

While Environment Secretary George Eustice's suggestion that the new payments represent a 30% rise seems a tad optimistic, the figures for many options have increased – and in some cases substantially.

DEFRA is keen to highlight its Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS), but we have precious little detail about that and the sums don't look particularly generous in terms of what we do know about its first strand, the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI).

With this in mind – and set against the backdrop of falling Basic Payments (BPS) – there is much to be said for signing up to a scheme that's available now and will give a guaranteed income for five years.

Remember, too, DEFRA has said that if you did decide you wanted to end a CS agreement and switch to ELMS you could do so without penalty, making CS a good stepping-stone to the future, with the second tier of ELMS, the Local Nature Recovery scheme, shaping up to be very similar to it.

The application deadline for a five-year CS agreement starting on 1 January 2023 is likely to be 31 July 2022, so entering this would offer some stability over the period that BPS is set to dwindle to zero.

Some farmers operating extensive grassland systems rearing beef or sheep have not been wowed by rates in the past, but with the GS2 payment having risen from £95/ha to £132/ha, now might be the time for South East farmers running such systems to reconsider.

On one mixed farm I advise, the new rates have meant an agreement worth £25,000 a year is now worth nearly £30,000 (because the increases also apply to existing agreements). It's also worth noting that agreements already in place continue to receive the old rate for those options if the payment has fallen.



Entering CS has turned the key on lots of changes on this unit, which has 155ha permanent pasture and 45ha of arable. The agreement has allowed a shift away from arable production towards a more extensive beef system, reducing the amount of working capital tied up, cutting contracting costs and allowing a refocusing of priorities across arable, grass and woodland.

Some people previously viewed CS and other agri-environment grassland options as not that productive, but the legume and herb-rich sward option (GS4) is becoming ever-more popular and most who have tried it are positive, suggesting it's really useful from a grazing point of view. This now pays £358/ha.

You don't need to enter a whole farm into CS, so there are opportunities with less productive areas, such as field corners, wetter pieces of ground or boundary strips – and you can sign up to as many or as few options as you like. But it's also important not to view it solely as a response to dealing with less productive parcels of land. There are options that can help the way you farm, building in rotations that benefit cropping and soil health.

CS also gives you the chance to apply for capital funding, for work such as fencing and water troughs, although DEFRA has missed an opportunity here by not revising these rates. Fencing, for example, is still funded at £4.90/m, even though fencing costs have risen astronomically over the past few years.

So, even if you have considered CS before and decided it wasn't for you, it's worth looking at it again as it could be a game-changer. The scheme, rightly, had its share of bad press in its early stages for being complicated and requiring far too much record-keeping, but it has been simplified and the Rural Payments Agency has been getting its act together regarding payments.

It's worth planning well ahead of July as deadlines have a habit of creeping up on all of us (especially if we're not given a lot of notice of them, as happened recently with the application period for the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund).

The SFI will be introduced in 2022 and some people will inevitably continue to avoid CS on the basis that the next scheme DEFRA introduces will be the much-longed-for panacea.

The SFI looks potentially complicated for not a lot of money. There is not enough detail yet and an awful lot of conditions for a maximum of £58/ha on improved grassland or £40/ha on arable under the relevant soil standards.

Better to get a good CS in place first and then see how you might be able to fit the SFI around that.

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