WOODLAND TRUST

Position statement : Sustainable agriculture, woodland and wildlife

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Definitions

The widely accepted definition of sustainable development: 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs[i]' is encompassed by the International Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture's[ii] definition of sustainable agriculture as 'a sustainable agriculture is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just and humane.'

British agriculture and its dependence on Europe

Europe's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was established in 1962 driven by a strategic need for food security in Europe. The CAP created a deliberate economic signal to increase domestic food production. It was founded on the basis of 'open-ended price support', that is, if output doubled so did revenue[iii]. Furthermore, it included protection for domestic markets through import taxes and export subsidies. As production responded, increasing surpluses necessitated heavier expenditure, which led to friction with other suppliers to the world market who were not reliant on subsidy[iv].

The CAP was so successful that by the late 1980's surpluses such as the widely reported grain mountains and milk lakes were being produced. Various systems designed to limit this over-production were introduced such as set-aside, milk quotas and reduced price support, but they have failed to limit production and the intensification of farming. To compensate for reduced price support subsidies then largely included direct payments to farm businesses, based on the cropped area or number of animals. This further encouraged large farms and intensive systems with increasing numbers of animals, resulting in further loss of space for wildlife and overgrazing and also in larger farms being paid more. Indeed 80% of the subsidies are received by 20% of the farmers. Perversely our small and marginal farms, particularly in western and northern areas, worst hit by recent crises, generally deliver more in the way of public benefits although they only receive 20% of the subsidies.

Increased production and intensification have brought with them far-reaching consequences for the natural environment. For example, our three most precious natural resources, soil, water and air are heavily degraded. From 1995-1998, 2.3 million tonnes of topsoil were lost due to erosion[v], 8.1% of the national emissions of greenhouse gases between 1995 and 1997 came from agriculture[vi] and water companies spend £120 million every year removing pesticides from watercourses[vii]. Semi-natural habitats have been lost at an unprecedented rate to agriculture: 20% of all ancient woodland lost since the 1930s, and 98% of wildflower meadows and 190,000km of hedgerows since 1950 [viii]. Similarly some of our best loved wildlife has declined: for example, corn bunting down 83%, willow tit down 69% and skylark down 53% in the last 30 years[ix]. Cultural artefacts have also been damaged and destroyed, for example, 30% of all damage to ancient monuments in the last 50 years has been due to agriculture. The inappropriate farming practices, perpetuated

by the CAP, that take little account of ecological or cultural interests continue to threaten parts of the British countryside today.

Agri-environment schemes were established in the UK in the late 1980's to encourage farmers to manage their land in more environmentally friendly ways. However, these schemes have involved fewer than 10% of farms to date, and the limited resources available restricts the benefit the schemes can deliver[x]. All schemes are also heavily over-subscribed. Further limits to the performance of agri-environment schemes stem from the ways that they are designed, promoted and delivered as well as the fact that other parts of the CAP provide incentives for farmers to do precisely the opposite to what agri-environment schemes are seeking to do.

The way ahead

European and UK Government policy is now changing to reflect that farming is about more than food production and to acknowledge that it also plays a vital role in shaping our countryside and is an important part of rural life. The Rural Development Regulation (RDR), which resulted from the EU's Agenda 2000 agreement on the future of the CAP, has resulted in EU member states producing Rural Development Plans (RDPs). These RDPs involve various incentive schemes designed to help farmers, foresters and rural businesses develop. They include vocational training and rural enterprise initiatives, as well as measures to conserve and improve the environment, known as agri-environment schemes. However, the RDR expenditure covering all of the above only accounts for a small fraction of the EU total CAP budget which totals 40 billion Euro (£24 billion)[xi].

The 2003 Mid-Term Review of the Agenda 2000 reforms, has seen a fundamental and major change in the way agriculture is now supported. These reforms have seen the beginning of a more sustainable approach to management of our countryside. EU farmers are no longer paid on the basis of what, or how much, they produce from their land - subsidies have been 'decoupled' from production. A new kind of support, the Single Payment Scheme (SPS), is now paid on farmed land, irrespective of what is produced. The SPS is based on slightly different criteria across the UK. In England it will move to an area only basis by 2012, but in Scotland and Wales the payment will continue to be made only for land that was in production from 2000-02. In Northern Ireland payment will be a hybrid of the English and Wales/Scottish approach. The advantage of the area payment basis in England is that it is more equitable, will allow formerly ineligible farming sectors to receive SPS and ensures payment is no longer linked to how intensively a farm was run from 2000-02.

Perhaps the most significant factor to come from the 2003 reforms was increased use of cross-compliance. This means conditions a farmer has to meet in order to receive SPS. A wide range of conditions has been developed in the UK, with differing emphasis in different countries, but all essentially following the same EU framework. All farmers must fulfil Statutory Management Requirements, to ensure they meet EU legislation and all must also abide by a range of measures known as Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). While the statutory management and GAEC requirements are all based largely on legislation, what now sets them apart is that compliance is linked directly to payment of subsidy.

Agri-environment schemes

Changes to the agri-environment scheme framework across the UK will further benefit wildlife and the countryside. In 2005 the first of the UK's Entry Level schemes were launched in England and Wales (Tir

Cynnal). The same approach has been adopted in Scotland as Tier 2 of their Rural Development Contracts (RDCs). These 'entry-level' schemes are available to all farmers, for simple yet meaningful improvements to their farms, such as improved hedgerow management and installation of buffer strips around woodland.

In England, Environmental Stewardship replaces existing agri-environment schemes and includes the entry-level as well as higher-level schemes. The higher level scheme seeks to improve on the previous agri-environment schemes, Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes. Environmental Stewardship now includes a full suite of farm woodland and trees options, which will ensure a much great number of woodland owners will be engaged than would otherwise be the case solely through the England Woodland Grant Scheme. The RDC framework in Scotland essentially mirrors the approach being taken in England, although their advantage is that they amalgamate agri-environment and forestry grants under this one framework, making the grant system less confusing and long winded for applicants. RDCs have a number of tiers, with regulation and cross compliance being seen as the minimum acceptable standard in Tier 1, entry-level options (Land Managers' Options) in Tier 2 and higher level options (Rural Priorities) delivered in Tier 3.

The Woodland Trust's View

The Woodland Trust has a vision for a sustainable well-wooded countryside, which has diversity of landscape, biodiversity and rural culture at its heart[xii]. Controlling 77% of the land area farming has an obvious and powerful influence on the countryside. The Woodland Trust has created this position statement in view of the many environmental concerns over today's farming systems as well as its influence on surrounding land, particularly issues such as pesticide and fertiliser drift, overgrazing, fragmentation of ancient woodland and GMO's (position statement 14).

The Trust believes that forestry and agriculture are integral land uses both to each other and to the UK's countryside. In the face of rapid environmental change and the need for woodland species to be able to move and adapt, an ecologically functional landscape can only be achieved through a wholesale reduction in the intensity of farming across the UK, albeit to greater or lesser degrees in certain areas. There is also a need to buffer and expand existing semi-natural habitats through habitat creation on former agricultural land, particularly in areas with a high density of ancient woodland, thereby increasing their ecological resilience and making them more welcoming to the establishment of species when they happen to arrive from a long distance.

The Woodland Trust supports the major shift in support payment method and the introduction of cross-compliance. We believe this is the right step to putting the wider countryside on to a more sustainable footing. However we wish to see cross compliance become more flexible to enabling woodland creation or regeneration on land not wholly in agricultural production, where it lies adjacent to ancient woodland. Currently in parts of the UK, such activity would risk loss of SPS. Furthermore cross compliance does not protect ancient trees on farmland, as TPO and felling licence legislation is insufficient.

A key element of the vision for a more sustainable countryside is the EU's RDR and the resultant country RDPs, which provide a way to bring farming closer to the market in terms of producing what people want, both from good quality local food and also from the broader benefits of the countryside, through Woodland Grant and Agri-Environment Schemes. The Woodland Trust warmly supports the development of entry-level agri-environment schemes across the UK. These schemes, which will be available to all farmers, will do much to raise the level of environmental standard on farms through simply yet meaningful options. While the

options are limited "entry-level" type options, this grant is truly landscape scale, in its nationwide coverage. Given the need to integrate thinking on land use generally, the Trust believes that woodland grants should also be part of each country's agri-environment scheme framework and for this reason the Woodland Trust supports the approach taken with integration of agri-environment and forestry grants in the RDCs in Scotland and the inclusion of a full suite of woodland options in Environmental Stewardship in England. The Trust has been closely involved in both scheme's design.

More recently still, the Trust has worked with other NGOs, through Wildlife and Countryside Link, to produce a policy perspective for sustainable land management, post 2013, called *Beyond the Pillars*[xiii]. This policy perspective sets out the NGO community's view on how EU agricultural policy should evolve to deliver sustainable land management in order to address the environmental challenges of the future. It proposes moving beyond the two pillar framework of support, split between decoupled production support (SPS) and rural development support and in its place establish a single European Sustainable Land Management Policy.

Conclusions

A more sustainable agricultural industry is vital to the biodiversity of our countryside especially ancient woodland, which contains more species of conservation concern than any other UK habitat[xiv]. Many of these species are relatively immobile and given the rapid rate of environmental change, the hostile agricultural landscapes within which they live and the distance from other ancient woods, there is now a desperate need for a reduction in the intensity of agriculture in the UK and a move to more sustainable systems, together with buffering and expansion of existing sites, to help ensure that the wildlife associated with our ancient woodland and ancient trees has the ability to evolve and adapt. A sustainable agricultural industry will also ensure a vibrant and sustainable rural economy in terms of produce and the quality of landscape as a backdrop to other interrelated major industries such as tourism and leisure.

References

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