EVALUATION OF THE OPERATION OF
ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Defra project No. MA01028

FINAL REPORT

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We apologise for any omissions from the above list.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

The history of Environmental Stewardship, and the evaluation of its precursors, have been described in full by Radley (2005). A brief summary of the development of Environmental Stewardship (ES) is given here.

Environmental Stewardship arose from the mid-term review of agri-environment schemes in the England Rural Development Plan (ERDP). This review was informed by the report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, led by Sir Donald Curry (Curry, 2002), which recommended that a single new scheme should be introduced, incorporating a ‘broad and shallow’ scheme as the lower tier, plus an upper tier which should consist of rationalised elements of the existing schemes. The Policy Commission expressed support for organic farming and proposed that funding for environmental benefits should be provided through a separate strand of the ‘broad and shallow’ scheme. They further recommended that entry to the new scheme should be linked to the completion of a whole-farm audit, which would identify the key environmental assets of the farm. These recommendations were adopted by the Government as part of its Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food (SSFF) (Defra, 2002), which outlined plans for a pilot ‘entry level’ scheme in four areas during 2003, and committed to providing funding for a national scheme across England if the pilot was successful. The SSFF also described the Government’s intention to develop a new agri-environment scheme comprising entry level and higher tier strands. The scheme would have additional objectives, and include support for environmental benefits from organic farming and management of the uplands.

At the same time, the Defra Action Plan to Develop Organic Food and Farming in England (recommendation No 18) concluded that: “For the longer term support for organic farming will be delivered through a specific strand in the new structure of agri-environment schemes to be developed over the period 2002 to 2004. The organic strand will be designed to reflect and reward the environmental public goods delivered by organic production methods.”

The mid-term review also gathered evidence from a range of other sources. These included evaluations of the environmental effectiveness (Ecoscope et al., 2003) and economic aspects (University of Cambridge & CJC Consulting, 2002) and two rounds of public consultation. The first consultation was followed by the preparation of a ‘Framework document’, which formed the basis for the second consultation exercise. The framework document developed an outline for the proposed new scheme, based on evidence from evaluations of existing schemes, the initial consultation and additional sources such as the Countryside Survey 2000 (Haines-Young et al., 2000), a survey of flowering plants (Preston et al., 2002), surveys of risks to ancient monuments and other historic features (e.g. Bournemouth University, 1998; ADAS, 2002), a review of measures for the control of diffuse pollution (Withers et al., 2003), and a survey of public attitudes (Defra, 2001). Further details are given by Radley (2005).

The framework document outlined the objectives of the new scheme, its two-tier structure, the proposed three strands (ELS, OELS and HLS; see below), and proposals for provision of advice, support, monitoring and evaluation. The proposed entry level strand was developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders, and, because of the novel nature of the approach, it was piloted in four areas chosen to represent major farming types:

1 http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic/policy/actionplan/actionplan.htm
Market Deeping (arable), Mortimer (lowland mixed farming), Tiverton (lowland livestock) and Barnard Castle (upland).

Evaluation of the pilot Entry Level Scheme indicated that it had been largely successful in achieving its objectives (Boatman et al., 2004), and a proposal for a national scheme was submitted for consideration by the European Commission in autumn 2003. An Organic Entry Level Scheme was also put forward for organic farmers, to replace support previously provided by the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). Proposals were also developed for a Higher Level Scheme which would replace the existing Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) schemes. These three would form the strands of the new Environmental Stewardship (ES) Scheme under the ERDP.

The new scheme was launched in March 2005 against a background of other changes to agricultural support payments resulting from the recent CAP reform process. From 2005, farmers received a Single Farm Payment, which would gradually become a flat rate payment over the period 2005-2012. This payment would be modulated to contribute to funding of the ES which would cover much more farmland than the previous schemes and would require a substantially bigger budget. Payments are also subject to new cross-compliance conditions, relating to the maintenance of land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC), and Statutory Management Requirements.

Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) represents a new concept in agri-environment support within the UK. It is designed to encourage simple environmental management above the cross-compliance GAEC and SMR requirements. Major differences from previous schemes include the following:

- It is open to all eligible farmers and landowners in England, and is not competitive.
- Agreements are for 5 years.
- A flat rate payment is provided per hectare of eligible land (£30/ha/year, or £8/ha/year on land parcels of 15ha or greater within the Less Favoured Area). The LFA payment rate applies to both ELS and OELS; there is no different payment rate for OELS eligible land.
- Acceptance into the scheme is achieved by accumulating points up to a threshold. Options are selected from a menu, each option being allocated a fixed number of points per unit area, length etc.
- Applications must include a Farm Environmental Record (FER), which is a map showing the habitats and environmental features on the farm, as well as a map showing the planned location of the options to be implemented.
- A new resource protection objective is included in addition to the previous agri-environment scheme objectives: conservation of biodiversity and landscape character, and protection of the historic environment.
- ELS is a ‘hands–off’ scheme, i.e. it is intended that the application and implementation processes will be undertaken by the farmer without the need for substantial additional support other than the explanatory literature provided, and events organised by the Conservation Advice Programme2

Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) is similar to ELS, but with the following differences:

- It is only open to farmers with land registered as fully organic or under conversion to organic farming, with a Defra-approved Organic Inspection Body.

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2 The Conservation Advice Programme is delivered by FWAG and ADAS. Initially it was mainly concerned with promotion of ES, but now is now organising an increasing number of best practice events for existing ELS agreement holders (e.g. see http://www.adas.co.uk/projects/conservation_advice.htm).
• Payment on organic land eligible for the OELS is at a higher rate of £60/ha.
• There are also conversion aid top-up payments of £600/ha/year for top fruit orchards and £175/ha/year for improved land.
• Some options and payment rates are modified for organic land, and incompatible options are not available.

Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) replaces the Countryside Stewardship and Environmentally Sensitive Area Schemes. Although there are many similarities to the former schemes, there are also important differences:

• Like ELS/OELS; HLS has a new primary objective to protect natural resources but it also has new secondary objectives of flood management and conservation of genetic resources.(Other CS and ESA objectives of wildlife conservation, maintenance and enhancement of landscape quality and character, protection of the historic environment, and promotion of public access and understanding of the countryside also remain).
• Entry is normally conditional upon application to ELS or OELS.
• Applicants are required to prepare a Farm Environment Plan (FEP), which builds on the FER to provide a more detailed assessment of the environmental features present on the farm.
• The scheme is outcome-focused, and incorporates ‘indicators of success’ for each option.

HLS is discretionary and targeted on local environmental priorities within a national framework, which are used for assessing applications. A much higher level of support and advice is available, and all applicants are visited by a Natural England adviser, to assist in drawing up the agreement. Agreement holders will be visited at intervals during the life of the agreement. Agreements are for 10 years, with a break-point at 5 years.

1.2 EVALUATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

In June 2005, the Central Science Laboratory was commissioned by Defra to undertake an evaluation of the operation of ES during its first two years. The objectives, as set out in the original specification of requirements, were as follows:

• Identification of the main factors influencing uptake of the scheme, its separate strands and individual measures, with comparison of how this varies between different regions, farm sizes and farm types.
• Evaluation of the response of scheme participants and non-participants (including existing agri-environment agreement holders and non-participants) to ES and its processes; and the extent to which factors such as application processes (including FER/FEP), prescriptions, options and payment rates are influencing decisions to enter and the level of the scheme entered;
• Evaluation of the attitudes of existing CSS/ESA/WES (Wildlife Enhancement Scheme) agreement holders to ES, and of the dynamics of land leaving these schemes; i.e. to what extent does land from CSS/ESA/WES transfer to ES, and if so, to which strands/options.
• Evaluation of the effectiveness of scheme information and advice provided to potential applicants;
• Assessment of how external factors in agriculture e.g. CAP reform, are influencing the attitudes of potential applicants to entering ES;
• Evaluation of the impact of OELS on the organic sector as a whole, including the role of the scheme in facilitating commitment and conversion to organic farming;
• Evaluation of the effectiveness of the environmental audit process (involving the completion of a ELS/OELS FER or a HLS FEP identifying features of
environmental interest and ensuring they are placed into appropriate management options;
- Evaluation of the likely impact of ES management on land transferring from WES.
- Evaluation of the additionality provided by the ELS/OELS;
- Evaluation of the potential of ES, and its component strands, to meet its environmental objectives, building on work undertaken as part of the evaluation of the pilot ELS.
- Assessment of the likely contribution of ES to Defra PSA targets and other high level strategic policy initiatives (e.g. Biodiversity Action Plan, Water Framework Directive etc.).

These objectives have evolved to some extent with time, for example, Natural England and its predecessor English Nature initiated a project to evaluate the transfer of WES agreements to ES, so this was not included as a specific part of the current evaluation.

The evaluation was structured into four modules, with the third being broken down into four sub-modules, as follows:

1: Questionnaire survey of participants (postal + visit) and non-participants (postal).
2: Analysis of uptake (statistical & spatial)
3: Delivery of environmental outcomes:
   a: Validation of FERs and FEPs (field survey)
   b: Baseline environmental assessment of ELS/OELS (field survey + interview)
   c: Survey of stakeholder views (on-line questionnaire)
   d: Modelling of environmental outcomes (based on expert judgement)
4: Holistic overview

Field work was carried out on the farms selected for the interview survey, to enable linkages between interview and field data to be analysed where appropriate. This was particularly relevant for the baseline environmental assessment, where evidence from both field data and interviews were used.

An additional survey of upland and lowland livestock farms was carried out in 2006, as a result of stakeholder concern that farmers in the Less Favoured Areas were finding it more difficult than their lowland counterparts to enter ES. This was reported separately (Bishop et al., 2007).

This is the final report of the main evaluation, incorporating the full results of work carried out between June 2005 and May 2007. Additional material is presented in a number of appendices, including further explanation of methodological detail, questionnaire and recording forms, and additional data not included in the main body of the report.

References


