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2.2 Cereals Set-aside

To begin with set-aside offered little environmental benefit. However, rule changes made it more suited to wildlife:

- Rotating set-aside brought pattern and stubbles back into a landscape dominated by winter crops.
- Spraying rotational set-aside, rather than cutting it, reduced the wildlife mortality.
- Permitting wildlife plantings encouraged many farmers to plant seed mixes for birds which they would not have done otherwise.
- Permitting the set-aside allocation to be distributed in small strips benefited some animals.

The wildlife that has benefited most from set-aside are open-country species like lapwing, stone curlew, skylark and brown hare.

Do you consider that abolition of set-aside in the current context of market and policy developments is appropriate?

Yes – provided new voluntary measures are put in place to help conserve the animals and plants that have benefited from cereals set-aside over the last decades.

What measures do you consider appropriate in order to maintain environmental benefits associated with set-aside?

While the environmental benefits of set-aside are clear, some of it had limited value because;

- It was amalgamated into a single block away from the rest of the farm
- It was sprayed with herbicide at the earliest opportunity so providing poor habitat.
- It was left to develop into a thick grass sward with little diversity.
- It was used for industrial crops

We think that we could get as much environmental value from an area of land equivalent to a small fraction of past set-aside - if it is managed deliberately for conservation.

We propose that a minimum of 1% of the farm cropping area should be managed under one of three open-field conservation regimes. This land, should be distributed in patches of a 1 hectare such that:

- a) The average widths of patches must be no less than 20 metres
- b) Patches are not sited within 50 metres of any woodland.
- c) Individual patches must not be less than 500 metres apart.

Appropriate regemes are:

- **Rotational fallow.** Following a cereal crop which has not been treated with a pre-harvest herbicide, the area is left as stubble until mid May, after which it can be treated with herbicide, but should not be cultivated until mid July after which it can brought back into rotation.
- **Meadow.** Permanent areas left as grass or natural regeneration, or re-seeded with wildgrass/wild flower mixture (grant for establishment costs). After establishment no fertilizer or pesticide to be used. Managed annually either by mowing after mid July and/or grazing between September and March.
- **Wildlife crop.** Mixtures of seed and cover crops used to provide food and cover for birds. Species such as kale, quinoa, triticale to be used in combination. Management would require cultivation and re-drilling bi-annually, as well as appropriate fertilizer and pesticide applications. Because of the high management costs, patches of this option need only be half the size of the meadow and rotational fallow options i.e. one half of 1% of the farm area.

We would want these measures to be adopted on most farms. We think this should be paid for under agri-environment measures and funded by further modulation. Under present market conditions agri-environment measures are unattractive to arable farmers because payments are far too low in relation to both the Single Farm Payment and the price of cereals. *Improving agri-environment payments to a level where they realistically cover income foregone should be a matter of priority.*

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