

# Conservation policy on farmland

Wildlife conservation and  
further reform of the Common  
Agricultural Policy

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# Wildlife loss from the countryside

**The Game Conservancy Trust aims for a thriving countryside rich in game and other wildlife. We use science to promote game and wildlife management as an essential part of nature conservation.**



*The grey partridge has been described as a barometer of the countryside because it is so sensitive to changes in farmland management.*



*Cereal sawflies have a life-cycle which depends on ley farming. Their caterpillars are a food for many farmland birds.*

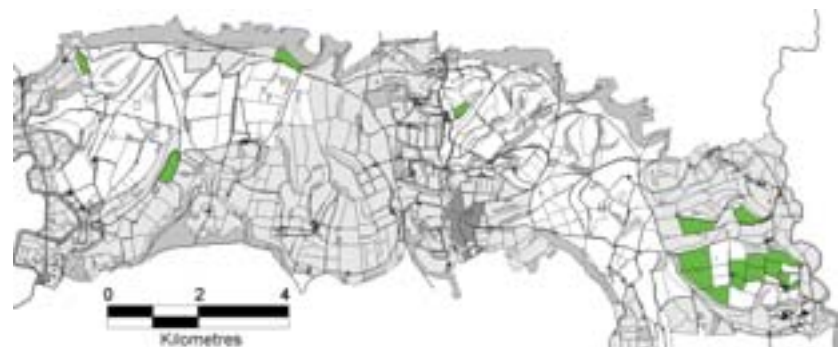
## **An ancient flora and fauna**

Britons have been growing cereal crops and raising livestock since the Neolithic period - a span of some 6,000 years. During that time a natural community of wild flowers, insects, birds and mammals became adapted to farmers' fields. Styles of farming have altered this ecosystem but the evolution has been slow and wildlife has had time to adapt. However, during the last 50 years changes have been dramatic and many animals and plants have been disappearing.

## **The destruction of biodiversity and loss of Britain's patchwork quilt**

- Oil brought the pesticide as well as the tractor and combine harvester. Herbicides, insecticides and fungicides have created weed free crops supporting little biodiversity.
- Artificial fertiliser came in the 1950s replacing farmyard manure and clover. Farmers simplified crop rotations, growing cereals and oilseed rape in large blocks of fields. The traditional patchwork quilt countryside was replaced by blankets of green and yellow.
- Traditional farms mixed livestock with arable. Mixed farming is no longer needed to maintain soil fertility and tractors have replaced the horses, which needed pasture and oats.

These changes have been encouraged by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which subsidised basic commodity crops. However, over production led to the introduction of set-aside (1986) and concerns about the loss of wildlife led to the introduction of agri-environment schemes (1992).



*Farmland on the Sussex Downs north of Worthing - a disappearing patchwork. Shown in green are fields that were in a ley arable rotation between 1970-75 (above) and between 1990-95 (below). The disappearance of ley farming has been a key factor in the decline of many species.*

# Restoring biodiversity to farmland



Conservation headlands retain some of the natural weed flora.



Beetle banks provide winter habitat for ground beetles - key aphid predators.



Wildlife set-aside strips provide winter and summer food for game and songbirds.



A wide grass margin at the base of the hedge protects it from spray and fertiliser drift and guards the crop from weeds like cleavers and sterile brome.

Recovering much of this lost biodiversity is not an impossible task. The 2003 CAP reform took some key steps:

- Production subsidies mostly stopped. This removed the distortion that encouraged the growth of crops on unsuitable land.
- The Entry-Level Stewardship scheme, introduced in 2005, is the most extensive agri-environment scheme so far. Two of its key features are:
  - It rewards farmers who have conserved wildlife habitats, either through traditional farming methods or by retaining natural features like hedgerows. (Older schemes only gave grants for new features - often paying farmers to restore habitats they had destroyed previously.)
  - It is not too prescriptive. Farmers can choose options that suit their farm.

What a future CAP reform should contain:

- A replacement for set-aside. The equivalent area should be transformed into a conservation measure. Properly deployed it can be used to bring back a little of the patchwork quilt that we have lost since the 1970s.
- Cross compliance measures. These must be transformed into a land management payment under Pillar 2 of the CAP.
- Measures to encourage soil and water conservation, as well as soil carbon sequestration.

## Four ways that Entry Level Stewardship options help wildlife on arable farms

- **The conservation headland.** A headland is the area of a field where the tractor turns when it reaches the field boundary. Lower yielding than the centre of the field because of soil compaction, it is also the most frequently used by wildlife. If a reduced spray regime is used on these headlands wild flowers will return, insect numbers including butterflies will increase, and insect eating birds like grey partridge chicks will survive.
- **The beetle bank.** Farmers use insecticides to control pests like cereal aphids, but in so doing they destroy many other insects, including the predatory beetles that eat aphids. These beetles over-winter in grassy banks and, by creating such a bank across the centre of a field, beetle numbers can be boosted and aphid outbreaks prevented.
- **Wildlife set-aside.** Most set-aside is simply left to regenerate as green cover over the set-aside period. But this acreage can be split up and distributed around the farm and planted with bird seed crops like kale or quinoa.
- **Hedgerows and field margins.** Many birds like partridges and yellowhammers nest in the grass bank at the base of the hedge or along fence rows. Protecting these margins from spray drift and fertiliser spill will help retain perennial species of grass and herb with their associated butterflies and other insects. It will also stop pernicious weeds like cleavers and sterile brome becoming established in the adjacent crop.

# Government action, References



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The pheasant-eye is one of a variety of arable weeds that have become rare since the intensification of cereal farming.



## What the Government must do

In 2001 the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, commissioned Sir Donald Curry to review the Future of Food and Farming. In his report Sir Donald endorsed the idea of switching some of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidy to support the environment. He believed this would be in the public interest. In particular he suggested a new 'broad and shallow' agri-environment scheme in which most farmers could participate and which would pay them for protecting the environment and encouraging wildlife.

In 2003 Secretary of State, Margaret Beckett, successfully negotiated these steps with the EU. Notwithstanding the difficulties in implementing the changes, agricultural policy now favours wildlife in a way that it never has before.

A future CAP reform should not return to production subsidies of any sort. If Pillar 1 of CAP is pulled down, then the environmental benefits of cross compliance and set-aside must become part of Pillar 2.

Agri-environment schemes must continue to be supported and improved.

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