

Replacing set-aside – what can you do for wildlife?

In a joint article, the NFU and RSPB look at what you can do to help the wildlife on your farm with the switch to 0% compulsory set-aside

Defra secretary Benn has issued a challenge to farmers and growers to shoulder their environmental responsibilities and ensure that wildlife does not suffer from a zero rate for set-aside in 2008.

NFU President Peter Kendall is confident that farmers and growers will retain areas of high conservation value and that increased production will not come at a cost to the

environment.

The uncropped areas and regenerated stubbles created by set-aside provided a range of benefits for wildlife and environmental protection. However, the same environmental benefits can be re-created on a much smaller area if the land is managed specifically to deliver them. So how can farmers respond?

Sir Don Curry is chairing a group of

government bodies, farming and environmental stakeholders charged with responsibility for monitoring the environmental impact. The NFU and RSPB, members of the group, have already agreed five questions farmers and growers can ask themselves to meet Hilary Benn's challenge of retaining the environmental benefits of set-aside with the switch to the 0% set-aside rate (see below).

THE KEY QUESTIONS

1. Are areas of 'set-aside' good for wildlife or the environment?

Marginal land that is poor for farming is often good for wildlife – wet fields, steep slopes, thin soils, field margins alongside woods, streams and rivers. Retaining uncultivated land in these areas will represent real gains for the environment, by, for example, 'buffering' a watercourse or providing a flowery habitat for pollinating insects. And, of course, agri-environment schemes, like ELS, offer options for this type of management while cross-compliance requires the protection of hedgerows and watercourses.

2. Can you provide wildlife with food over winter?

Grey partridge, skylark, tree sparrow, yellowhammer and corn bunting rely on over-wintered stubbles to survive the winter: retaining stubbles preceding spring crops until at least mid-February will make a huge difference – and can be funded by agri-environment schemes. Alternatively, one hectare of seed-rich wild bird cover or unharvested crop per 100ha can support the local population of seed-eating birds through the winter – again similar management options to deliver winter food can be chosen within agri-environment schemes.



3. What about spring and summer feeding areas?

Open areas with relatively sparse early crop cover are ideal habitats for nesting and foraging skylarks. Cross-compliance margins, buffer strips and ditch banks can all contribute insect-rich foraging areas on arable farmland as they can provide flower-rich habitats for pollinating insects and shallow edges of watercourses and ponds for aquatic insects. The SAFFIE research project found that skylark plots (an ELS option) in winter cereals take up 0.32% of field area but boost skylark productivity by about 50%. Simply switch off the drill or spray the crop out before the New Year to create two plots of 4m x 4m per hectare in winter cereal fields.

4. Can you use strips or parts of fields to reduce soil erosion and run-off?

The EU's Water Framework Directive will require all farmers and growers to follow 'catchment sensitive farming' principles – reducing run-off, leaching of nutrients and spray drift. Establishing permanent grassland against watercourses and on areas prone to soil erosion can protect your soils and watercourses and you can also use these to meet your LERAP requirements. In 42 catchments across England you can speak to a CSF office based locally, elsewhere try FWAG for advice.

5. Find out more about helping scarce species and protecting the environment on your farm

There is nothing better than knowing what wildlife you have on the farm to determine what you can do to help with the least amount of land. If you have bird or plant records for your farm and access to conservation advice, then you can develop an effective conservation plan, but otherwise, you can contact the RSPB Hotline to give some advice on how to proceed on 01767 693690. Or you may like to try FWAG's set-aside 'decision tree', developed with the Game Conservancy Trust (see FWAG's website <http://www.fwag.org.uk/setaside>).



You can do all of this through an agri-environment scheme, such as Entry Level Stewardship in England (ELS). The RSPB and University of Hertfordshire have produced a software programme that you can use, explaining how to do all of this and meet the other key objectives of ELS. You can download this from: <http://www.herts.ac.uk/aeru/ema/els/> or by requesting a 'Planning your ELS application' CD from the RSPB hotline number on 01767 693690. But whether or not you choose to use agri-environment schemes, you can build the haphazard environmental benefits of set-aside into your farm's management by planning now to deliver the biggest environmental bang on the most efficient patch of land. After all, who knows better than you how to make sure that natural resources and wildlife thrive on your farm?