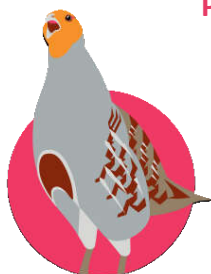




**What Scottish
stakeholders think of the
Agri-environment
Climate Scheme and how
it could be improved**

POLICY SUMMARY DOCUMENT



Interreg
North Sea Region
PARTRIDGE

European Regional Development Fund



EUROPEAN UNION



Game & Wildlife
CONSERVATION TRUST

Summary

Application procedure:

- The process must be simpler, so farmers have the option to apply themselves without needing advisors.
- Those advising farmers should have better knowledge of both farming and conservation.
- Assessment of applications should be based on overall quality, not just points accrued, to help small units access the scheme.
- Improve the (free) advice to farmers to improve the quality of applications.
- Perhaps offer training for farmers so they can make better applications themselves.

The scheme itself:

- The scheme needs to be less prescriptive and more flexible, allowing farmers to implement measures in a way that suits them and their farm.
- This would result in greater variation in habitats across the landscape and encourage uptake and farmer engagement.
- Predator control needs to be included in the scheme, integrated with habitat management, to help deliver desired outcomes.
- Monitoring of outcomes must be included to check that measures are working, further encourage farmer engagement, show the wider public the conservation action undertaken on farms and enhance our understanding of how to support farmland wildlife.
- Farmers should have access to free advice during implementation.
- Payments need to better reflect all costs to farmers.
- Fixed payments for implementing measures could be topped-up based on outcomes to increase payments and reward effective management.



Introduction

We interviewed five agri-environment policy influencers and ten farmers regarding the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) and farmland conservation in general. This was undertaken as part of the PARTRIDGE project, co-funded by the EU's Interreg fund, which is taking place in Scotland, England, Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium, demonstrating how such schemes can be improved to boost declining arable farmland wildlife (<https://northsearegion.eu/partridge/>). We here summarize the main findings for each topic discussed. A full report is available on request.

Results

Organisation & design of the scheme

Many farmers were critical of how Government runs AECS and of the auditing system, suggesting it is too prescriptive and inflexible. Of greatest concern were difficulties getting into the scheme.

Suggested improvements were:

- The application process should be easier to understand and quicker to complete.
- Farmers should be able to complete it themselves, rather than have to pay someone else.
- The assessment process should focus on the quality of the application, rather than the number of points amassed. This would encourage more small farms to apply.
- Increased funding would accommodate more applicants.
- Making sure farmers have access to free advice so they can produce high quality applications, increasing their chances of success.

Implementing scheme agreements

Farmers felt that the complexity and inflexibility of AECS made it hard to understand and implement, which could result in penalties. A simpler scheme, with training in how to implement and administer management agreements, would be attractive and reduce administrative costs and bureaucracy.

A bottom-up approach, giving farmers more responsibility in choosing how to implement specific measures in line with their experience and requirements, rather than rigidly following prescribed guidelines, would also be an improvement. This would require an alternative benchmarking system, but it would have the added benefit of encouraging a wider variety of habitats and greater farmer engagement. It would also be easier for farmers to integrate AECS into their existing businesses.

Options available in the scheme

Some interviewees felt that not all AECS options delivered benefits for wildlife due to the restricted scale of implementation, an over-riding impact of predation and because some rules were actively counter to the desired aim of the measure. One suggestion was to extend predator control within AECS (at present, largely restricted to upland near designated sites). To ensure predator control is an effective conservation tool, it would benefit a wider suite of both upland and farmland birds such as the Grey Partridge if professional control could be extended as an option, where it is linked to suitable habitat management.

Monitoring of outcomes

A common criticism was the lack of formal monitoring. In 2019, the Rural Development Operational Committee expressed a desire to carry out monitoring of AECS and NatureScot (formally SNH) are currently working on payment by results pilot projects which incorporate monitoring. This is something that GWCT would enthusiastically support as monitoring has several benefits, including:

- It would prove that the options selected are having the desired effect (or not).
- Communicate the successes of AECS to the public and farmers, to show the positive work farmers do for the countryside and encourage more farmers to apply to AECS.
- Increased farmer engagement.
- To enhance our knowledge of local wildlife populations and how to help them.

Interviewees acknowledged that it would be difficult to monitor every farm with AECS, but farmers could do some monitoring themselves or an external surveyor, approved by the farmer and the regulatory body, could help. This would be more efficient if the surveyor assisted a number of local farmers together in a Farmer Cluster, for example.

Knowledge of farmers

Interviewees acknowledged that farmers often lack knowledge about conservation which is required to make the right decisions for biodiversity when applying to AECS. This might be improved through formal training and better guidelines, but would also be helped if schemes were simpler.

The quality of advice

The knowledge of advisors was seen as key in the success of AECS. Given that farmers often lack the required knowledge themselves, they need quality advice to maximise their chance of successfully applying to and then implementing AECS. Many interviewees did not believe that Government advisors have enough knowledge of ecological or farming issues. If advisors were accredited using one trusted Scottish system, they would be better able to advise farmers. Accredited advisors could be listed on a simple website which might also directly offer basic advice.

Better advice would lead to more effective AECS plans, correctly implemented, which in turn would boost biodiversity and farmer motivation.

Payment

Interviewees generally agreed that AECS payments were insufficient and that this should be related to income foregone. Payment by results is an alternative mechanism, but many farmers felt this was risky because too many variables outwith their control can influence results. Increasing the amount of money available for AECS would allow more to be done for biodiversity and farmers.

A safer alternative mechanism that was suggested was a guaranteed payment with a top-up based on results. This would ensure farmers received an adequate reward, even if some of the measures did not produce results due to unforeseen circumstances. Another was to scrap Pillar 1 payments and allocate all funds to Pillar 2.

Farmers interviewed who were in AECS believed that the guaranteed income it provided helped to reduce financial uncertainty, but this was not a view shared by the farmers outwith AECS, who

believe there is too much risk involved. Whatever future payment system is decided upon, the risk to farmers should be kept to a minimum to encourage as many as possible into AECS.

Farmer Clusters

A cluster is a group of local farmers who work together to deliver conservation over a large area, with outside assistance of their choosing. This concept has flourished in England where there is a facilitation scheme to help set-up and run clusters. The biggest obstacle to establishing Farmer Clusters in Scotland, suggested by farmers in all consultations we have held, is a lack of financial support. Other suggestions proposed here were that the larger average farm size in Scotland does not lend itself to clusters and that there is less of an appetite for it here for various reasons. This is despite Scottish farmers working together in other arenas such as co-operatives and other collaborative ventures pump-primed by the Scottish Agricultural Organisation Society.

Interviewees recognised potential benefits of Farmer Clusters, such as landscape-scale conservation and the various social and business advantages of engaging with a group of like-minded people.

Conclusions

The interviewees agreed on most issues. Everyone felt that farming should balance productivity with biodiversity. All the farmers felt a responsibility towards the environment, demonstrating a clear desire to help arable farmland wildlife. It is important that future policy better helps farmers do this.

Clearly stakeholders and farmers were broadly critical of AECS and there is a need for fundamental reform. The challenges posed by Brexit nevertheless provide an opportunity to overhaul AECS and this process must involve farmers (and others) throughout to avoid repeating many of the current issues. The suggestions outlined here are practical and we would advocate pilots to compare the merits of each.

Encouragingly, the findings here are broadly in line with previous research and with the GWCT's document 'Farming through Brexit: a vision for the future', produced after consultation with stakeholders and farmers. This details a potential audit system, tiered payments and suggestions for managing the system. It is available on request.

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