

Rural Development Programme 2007 - 2013

In July, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle Gildernew MP MLA, announced European Commission approval of the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme (RDP). The new Programme is worth over £500 million and is comprised of fourteen separate measures. These are aimed at:

- ❖ improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
- ❖ improving the environment and the countryside;
- ❖ contributing towards the quality of life in rural areas;
- ❖ diversification of the rural economy.

One of the measures that will receive funding is a new agri-environment scheme that will be launched in 2008. Building on 20 years of experience of Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme and Countryside Management Scheme, the new scheme will provide opportunities for farmers to do even more for the environment.

With many of the current options remaining, additional new options will be available to help improve biodiversity on farmland. To recognise the importance of waterways on the farm there will be a new option to carry out enhancement work on farm waterways and their margins.



To increase the range of environmental works possible under the scheme, agreement holders will have the opportunity to submit individual or joint projects for funding that meet a specific environmental need on the farm.

Consideration will be given to allow existing participants the opportunity to move to the new scheme over the period of the Rural Development Programme to take advantage of the new options and payment rates.

Water Framework Directive



Rivers, streams and sheughs on the farm can provide an important habitat for a wide range of aquatic insects. These provide an important food supply for birds such as grey wagtail, dipper and sand martin. Such biodiversity will only be found where there is constant good water quality.

The Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) (WFD) came into force on 22 December 2000 and aims to protect and enhance the water environment. It has set a target for all waters, including rivers, lakes and groundwater to achieve good status by 2015. Measures introduced under the WFD to deliver necessary improvements include the Nitrates Action Programme.

Responsible farm waste management and effective pollution control are essential in keeping farm waterways clean and are a basic requirement of all agri-environment agreements. Management options available to agri-environment participants to enhance farm waterways include the creation of ungrazed river margins. These margins, as well as reducing the risk of nutrient run-off to rivers, form the boundary between water and land. The vegetation along a waterway plays an important role in the life-cycle of many aquatic insects. In the new scheme, there will also be options for participants to carry out some in-river enhancement to improve biodiversity.

Reminders

Habitat	No grazing period
Species Rich Grassland (Wet)	1 January – 15 May 1 January – 31 May (agreements signed before May 2005)
Species Rich Hay Meadow	1 November – cutting date after 1 July
Blanket Bog	1 November – 28/29 February – sheep only
Heather Moorland	Sheep: 1 November – 28/29 February Cattle: 1 September – 31 May
Wetlands – Fen, Swamp, Reedbeds	1 January – 31 May
Cutover Lowland Raised Bog	1 November – 31 May
Winter Feeding Sites for Swans and Geese	1 October – 31 March

Optional habitats	Dates to carry out work
Retention of winter stubble	No ploughing, cultivation or application of farmyard manure or herbicides permitted until after 15 February
Lapwing Breeding Sites	Graze the sward to 3cm by mid March in preparation for nesting

Work	Dates to carry out work
Heather Regeneration – Flailing / burning	1 September – 14 April
Tree Planting	Within first year of your agreement or revised agreement
Rush Cutting: Species Rich and Unimproved Grassland, Lapwing and Breeding Wader Habitats	Between 15 July -15 March
Scrub Control	Between 1 September – 28/29 February. Cut back small areas of scrub in rotation
Hedge Restoration	Coppice or lay before end February. Plant the metres noted on your farm management map in mild dry weather, October - March
Hedge Cutting	1 September - 28/29 February

Maps should be updated as soon as possible once land is sold, bought or used for building. Agri-environment scheme claims cannot be processed until farm maps are updated and the agri-environment scheme agreement revised. Payments plus interest may be recovered for land removed from agri-environment agreement within the first five years.

Please declare all uncompleted work on your annual management claim form, for example incompleteness of field boundary work and tree planting.

This newsletter is produced by Countryside Management Branch for participants in agri-environment schemes. For further information contact your local Countryside Management staff or;

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Countryside Management

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There are currently around 13,000 participants in agri-environment schemes



David Gillespie discussing the management of new hedges on James Hill's farm, Armoyle.

Off to a Good Start!

Earlier this year David Gillespie was appointed the Senior Countryside Management Adviser in Co Antrim. He is photographed examining a newly planted hedge on James Hill's grassland farm. James, from Carrowreagh Road, Armoyle, is a Countryside Management Scheme participant.

The hedge has a mixture of thorn quicks, dog rose, holly, hazel and rowan whips planted at intervals. James has made sure that the hedge gets off to a good start by using plastic weighed down with stone to control the weeds. He has a wider than normal spaced double fence to allow easy trimming of the young plants and prevent cattle from damaging the quicks.

Facts on Agri-environment (AE) Schemes

- Currently 460,000ha of land under AE agreement;
- 541ha ancient monuments protected;
- 8,638ha of farmland managed for breeding lapwing and other wading birds;
- 605km of hedgerows to be restored this winter 2007/2008;
- 505ha grass margins managed for wildlife;
- 633ha native trees planted;
- 71ha traditional orchards restored;
- 1634ha of wild bird cover grown to feed seed-eating birds over winter.

Inside this issue:

- Winter feeding sites for swans and geese;
- Retaining winter stubble;
- Biodiversity;
- Cross-Compliance;
- Rural Development Programme 2007 - 2013;
- Water Framework Directive.

Do you have swans or geese grazing your land this winter?

From October onwards, depending on prevailing weather conditions, large numbers of swans and geese which bred in Iceland, Greenland and Canada during the summer months will arrive in Northern Ireland. Loughs Foyle and Swilly are the most important wintering sites in the UK and Ireland, holding up to 4,000 birds at any one time. On 18 October up to 1,000 whoopers were spread between these sites.



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Many of the whooper swans will be in family groups, with the young birds recognisable by their grey, rather than white, plumage. The geese may include migratory greylags, Greenland white-fronted geese and also pale-bellied brent geese which are found largely in the Lough Foyle and Strangford Lough areas.

Following their long journey from the Arctic, swans and geese top up their energy reserves by feeding in fields of ryegrass, winter cereals and winter oilseed rape. Farmers who have land used regularly by migratory swans and geese during the winter may opt to receive payments to manage these fields under their agri-environment scheme agreements. To prevent disturbance to the birds, all cultivation must be completed before 1 October and stock removed from the fields between 1 October and 31 March. Swans and geese prefer large, open fields so they can look out for predators, and often feed next to roost sites on lakes. For these reasons, new hedge and tree planting and fencing on or next to grazing fields requires written permission from Countryside Management Branch, DARD.



Retaining winter stubbles – a feed bonanza for farmland birds

There is a wealth of evidence to link the decline of farmland bird species with agricultural change. A major change has been the decline in cropping area and switch from spring to autumn sown cereals. This has resulted in the loss of winter stubbles which are key foraging habitats

for birds, and sites for spring germinating flowers of arable fields. The retention of winter stubbles option under agri-environment schemes aims to boost the availability of seed for birds, especially through the winter.

Farmland birds such as the skylark, linnet, reed bunting, yellowhammer and twite feed on grain left behind after harvest and on weed seeds. They will benefit greatly from this option. Winter stubbles are advantageous to skylarks as they provide feed and the following spring cereal crop provides ideal nesting because skylark prefer to nest in a crop less than 30cm high. Winter cereals are not suitable for nesting as they reach this critical height significantly earlier, limiting breeding attempts. Spring crops will also provide nesting sites for lapwing.

Please note that there has been a change in the scheme rules so that all scheme participants with this option must retain winter stubbles until 15 February after harvesting. The area entered for retention of winter stubble must be present in each year of your agreement to qualify for payment.

If, in any year, you keep a smaller area of winter stubble than what is included in your agreement, then you must notify DARD by writing the actual amount to be claimed on the next annual management claim form.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the term given to the variety of plant and animal life that is found in our natural environment. The higher the number and range of plant and animal life present then the greater the biodiversity. For example, habitats such as species rich hay meadow, woodland and wetland will support a greater range of plant and animal life than intensively managed improved grassland.



The European Union has agreed to halt the decline in biodiversity and to restore habitats and natural systems. The Northern Ireland (NI) Biodiversity Strategy published in 2002 identified priority habitats and species for conservation action. Action Plans have been published for priority habitats such as upland heathland, blanket bog, oak woodland and parkland and for species such as curlew, lapwing, yellowhammer, chough and red squirrel.

The NI Biodiversity Habitat and Species Action Plans rely heavily on DARD agri-environment schemes for delivery of the action plan targets. The table below shows the total area of six key habitats, the area under AE scheme agreement and the % of the total area under AE scheme agreement.

Habitat	Estimated area (ha)	Area (ha) under AE scheme agreement	% area under agreement
Blanket Bog	140,000	38,156	27
Lowland Raised Bog	25,196	4,960	20
Mixed Ash Woodland	3,430	2,800	82
Oak Woodland	2,350	677	29
Wet Woodland	2,600	1,250	48
Calcareous Grassland	1,156	1,100	95

For further information on agri-environment schemes, contact Countryside Management Branch at your local Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Office.

Cross-Compliance

Since January 2005, all farmers in receipt of direct agricultural support including Single Farm Payment have been required to maintain their land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition. This means protecting sensitive areas of the farm including woodland, wetland, moorland and archaeological sites.

Agri-environment (AE) schemes such as the Countryside Management Scheme and the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme go one step further than Cross-Compliance and reward farmers for improving these important farm habitats.



Hedges are an important habitat for farmland birds including the yellowhammer, tree sparrow, linnet and song thrush. Cross-Compliance protects these birds by ensuring that hedges are not cut during the bird nesting season (1 March to 31 August). In addition AE scheme participants are delivering improvements to hedge nesting sites by maintaining a variety of hedge heights around the farm and not cutting any hedge more than once in two years. Hedge cutting should be left as late in winter as practical to leave berries and fruits for farmland birds to feed on.



Red Grouse © RSPB Images



Top Left to Bottom Right: Song Thrush Yellowhammer Tree Sparrow

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Upland areas are protected under Cross-Compliance by not permitting farmers to place supplementary feeders on heather moorland. AE scheme participants are improving upland areas through the implementation of low level grazing and appropriate agricultural practices such as heather burning and flailing. Heather moorland is an important habitat for the red grouse, curlew and hen harrier.

AE Scheme participants are delivering real improvements to farmland habitats in addition to the protection required as part of Cross-Compliance.