

Save Our Magnificent Meadows Grasslands Conference, March 2017

Workshop A - How can species-rich grasslands (SRG) be made economic and part of a commercial farming system?

Summary notes from the discussions that took place in the four workshops

Issues encountered managing SRG

- Most grassland (even commercial) is not economic without subsidies - SRG even more so.
- The hay-making tradition is still there because of agricultural environment schemes. The issue is one of scale and time - to drop to a hay-based feed system is difficult for those who have fed livestock with big bales and silage. Farming systems need to be economically viable to run.
- Animal diseases could be another factor to make grazing increasingly difficult.
- Specialisation of farms is also an issue. There's been a trend towards either arable or livestock specialisation, with fewer mixed farming businesses. It's a major problem as mixed farming is a mutually beneficial practice.
- Something catastrophic is needed to change a commercial farming system e.g. a major TB outbreak, or an older farmer dies, which causes a change in the farm enterprise.

Health benefits of SRG

- Health benefits to grazing animals being allowed to graze SRG, and for people that eat said animals - but more research is needed in this area.

How can SRG be made more economical and part of a commercial farming system?

- There is a growing sense that lower input, lower output has a role to play. The sums work but it's making a case and giving confidence to farmers who are locked into high intensity. Intensification of management has hidden costs and these should be evaluated to give a truer picture of SRG and the ecosystem services that these provide. As inputs drop so does income but is this proportional?
- It can be economic if the farm is entered into Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). Margins in livestock farming are very narrow, in Devon particularly and for several farmers the stewardship payments are fundamental. They would become bankrupt without payments.
- How do we persuade larger 'commercial' farms to keep and maintain SRG? The stewardship is important to larger farms as well although some find it constrictive. The hassle of agri-environment depends on how good Natural England support is. Some farmers need support filling in forms.
- There is a movement for more flood storage which could be positive for floodplain meadows. Floodplain management schemes are popular in Wales. There's an Exmoor project going on too which is trying to retain water in catchments. National Trust studied a catchment project slowing down water and flood storage. If they could incorporate wildflower seed into the management it would be a mammoth opportunity, but also need to think about how to manage the areas afterwards to maintain the species diversity.
- We need an ecosystem approach where SRG play a huge role. There is a need for case studies with more intensive farmers to demonstrate how SRG can fill part of the farming livestock management.
- Do away with Basic Farm Payment and concentrate more money on tier 2 schemes.
- Payment for results: There's a two year pilot project in Yorkshire Dales, where decisions lie with the farmer as to when they cut, less prescriptive. Activity is undertaken by the farmer.

There is hand holding to start with e.g. teaching them the different plant species. The idea is to have clear measurable outputs and progress determines payment level. Farmers are trained to monitor by themselves which engages and motivates them more. This is also cheaper to run, but the whole scheme can only be operated at a local level and it can't be a blanket approach. Farmers like being listened to and they are using their skills. Natural England are looking at two projects running concurrently - the livestock/grassland system in the Dales and an arable one in the East of England. They look at returns in terms of species - have a transect line and the number of species occurring on that line trying to answer the question how many species have increased? National Parks have a framework to assess results and a scoring system. It is funded through Europe but Natural England may be rolling Payment for Results out to other areas where it is suitable. Further examples can be found in the Burren Life-funded project which is recognised as a brilliant model.

- With Brexit, perhaps “payments for results” is a new way of engaging more farmers. Payment for results may be a little more tangible than ecosystem services. It may be less pay than HLS but better than no payment. Payment by result would be very difficult with different climatic and other conditions in each year.
- Brexit: Farmers may have to be more self-reliant. The future may mean costs of silage go up so it might be more attractive to have traditional meadows. We need to start talking to farmers about cost.
- Have premium products at higher prices - British breeds from British fields. Branding premium products is important - bring out the positives/opportunities?
- There is an increased interest in soils. Soils could be made more valued. The government needs to value it and pay for it - that would be a great thing.
- There is an opportunity to harvest and sell seed as there is a lack of providers to get local provenance. Where seed has been used there is a drive towards more regional seed providers, but there is still a need for plug plants and gaps in regional supply where there is a need for businesses to get off the ground.
- Example: A farmer gets £75 an acre for brush-harvested seed and still gets a hay crop after. If possible to work with big firms such as Tarmac. Get message back to landowners that there is a need. Big firms need the PR and that's where the money should trickle down.

How can we engage with commercial farmers?

- Best exchange is between big industrial farms, small holders and hobbyists.
- Continuity of advisors (and advice).
- Older farmers have maintained species-rich meadows but their sons now want to change to something else. Look at getting into agricultural colleges to speak to the younger generations. Start at Young Farmers Clubs and encourage colleges to include environmental issues as core subjects, not bolt on options.
- Look at influencing people about the nutritional value of SRG. We need an evidence-reviewed document.
- Peer learning is important. Farmers like hearing from other farmers. If it fits in with their system they are more likely to listen to them than a conservationist. Example: An NGO supplied green hay to one farm. They used it on their farm and then another farmer then asked to get green hay off him.
- A positive example of where working with smaller farmers is Bowland - where there is a sense of place and people working together.
- Join in with Soil Association events to reach wider audience.
- Demonstrate kit - having a machinery ring can boost numbers to events. Example: The Haytime project was very much about machinery. They used demo days to get farmers on board. Pull in academics as well. Effects of restoration work, medicinal properties and what research work is out there all of interest.



LOTTERY FUNDED

- Use a different approach like a Barn owl release to get farmers along and hang meadow management on.
- Start with 10m headlands and it could lead to people developing these into wildflower headlands.
- Make it social, bring family along.
- Farmer champions to do it.
- Do it at the right time - try to avoid clashing with the farming calendar and daily tasks of dairy farmers.
- A lot of the big farms are owned by men, who may not be interested in flowers. Farmers' wives might be more likely to listen.
- Example: The Game Conservancy are incredibly successful at engaging farmers - especially those large and rich. Purely through interest in partridge shooting. They invite farmers along for dinner and have scientific presentations at the same time. Once you get a few critical landowners involved, louder ones influence others.
- Organise cluster groups of farmers that pay into a pot for collective advise (Game and Wildlife Conservancy Trust are doing this).
- Flowering meadows competition run by and judged by farmers.

