

Environmental Stewardship

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Pennine Dales farm celebrates 25 years of environmentally friendly farming

Many rare plants, including globe-flower, black knapweed, marsh marigold and pignut, have thrived on a farm in the Pennine Dales thanks to 25 years of the landmark programmes that have been encouraging environmentally friendly farming practices.

Agri-environment schemes now operate across the country, with 52,000 farmers in England now signed up. The land farmed by Chris Dent was some of the first in the country to be signed up into the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme in 1987, which paid farmers to safeguard and enhance areas of landscape, biodiversity and cultural importance.

Mr Dent has farmed Peghorn Lodge for 10 years, a livestock farm with suckler cows and sheep. He took on the tenancy in 2002 when the previous tenant retired from farming. Mr Dent was happy to take over responsibility for the ESA agreement in order to continue the good environmental management of the traditional hay meadows which had been carried out by the previous tenant.

Visitors to the area could not fail to notice the spectacular sight of swathes of globeflower on the hillsides in the spring. The rare and declining black grouse and grey partridge are found on the farm.

Having an agri-environment agreement has been a positive experience for Mr Dent. He says: "It works really well for us. We do everything that is asked of us and the options fit in well with the farm. Being in the agreement has even enabled us to keep more cows and sheep."

The first ESAs were launched in five areas: The Broads, Pennine Dales, South Downs, Somerset Levels and Moors and West Penwith. This was a new and bold way of providing practical support to land managers to retain and protect valuable and threatened landscape, wildlife and archaeology, which might otherwise have been lost to intensification. Conserving hedgerows and field margins, reducing fertiliser use and supporting extensive grazing were among the early priorities of the ESAs. From the experiences learnt in the early ESAs came the development of more targeted schemes and agreements to conserve and enhance the countryside, which have helped to bring about and respond to environmental changes.

Farming Minister David Heath said: "Farmers and land managers are the guardians of England's iconic landscapes. Over the past 25 years agri-environment schemes have played a key role in enabling them and environmental organisations to improve the countryside and look after our wildlife".

In the Pennine Dales, the first tranche of ESAs were developed to protect upland hay meadows from agricultural intensification and to encourage traditional farming methods. Thanks to the ESA, the Pennine Dales have managed to retain some wonderful hay meadows rich in floral diversity which would have otherwise been lost. Much of this land is now moving into the successor scheme Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) with the opportunity to recreate valuable biodiversity habitats.

Alison Hiles, a lead adviser for Natural England, said: “The ESA in Weardale and Teesdale has enabled a dedicated and hardworking group of farmers and ecologists to maintain a wonderful area of diverse habitat and landscape. The meadows and pastures are rich in flowers and insects to delight botanists and children alike. The dramatic landscape is full of birds, particularly curlews, lapwing, snipe and black grouse. Without the ESA and now HLS, farmers could not afford to maintain this heritage for us.”

Mr Dent says his biggest achievement is the increase in hay meadows. He says: “Under agreement the only fertiliser we can use is manure. This has been fine for us. The crop yields on some of our fields have doubled in 10 years.” The transition from ESA to HLS has also been positive for Mr Dent, who said he now has more contact with his Natural England adviser and works well with her to ensure he gets the best results from the scheme.

He says the scheme doesn't present any challenges “but the wet summers do.” Without the agreement he wouldn't be able to afford the capital works he undertakes such as dry-stone walling.

Rebecca Barrett of the North Pennines AONB Partnership said: “The ESA scheme has been crucial in saving many upland hay meadows which might otherwise have been lost to intensification, in particular a switch to silage making. Some of the limitations of the ESA scheme are now being addressed by HLS, which has the potential to restore hay meadows, although it does take a while for the steps taken by farmers to bear fruit. HLS has been fundamental to the Hay Time Project which has run since May 2006 with the aim of enhancing and restoring upland hay meadows at carefully selected sites within the North Pennines AONB. The project works by harvesting seed from local species-rich meadows and spreading it on sites that have lost their special plants.”

Rebecca added: “It has been a fantastic example of partnership working between Natural England, the AONB and individual farmers. Between 2006 and 2012 AONB Partnership staff surveyed 1,211 fields, visited more than 290 farms to give hay meadow management advice and spread locally-harvested seed on 236ha of hay meadow. Agri-environment schemes have been central to the operation of the Hay Time project, providing the funding for contractors to harvest and spread the seeds on suitable farms.”

There are currently nearly 1,000 live ESA and ES agreements on the Pennine Dales committing nearly £4 million annually and covering more than 43,000 hectares of land, the equivalent of about 70,000 football pitches.