



Grazing your landscape

A guide to grazing under Cross Compliance and keeping your land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition

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Introduction

This leaflet updates the MAFF (now Defra) publication *Your livestock and your landscape*. It explains how Overgrazing and Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding controls will be implemented under the Single Payment Scheme, agri-environment schemes and the Hill Farm Allowance. It also gives advice to farmers on how to identify and avoid these particular practices in areas important to wildlife.

This leaflet supplements the *Single Payment Scheme: cross compliance guidance for the*

management of habitats and landscape features booklet, which sets out the minimum standards for maintaining the condition of the land you farm. You should also read the *Single Payment Scheme: cross compliance handbook for England*. Copies of these publications will have been sent to all farmers who applied for payment from the Single Payment Scheme.

Single Payment Scheme

The **Single Payment Scheme (SPS)** replaced most existing crop and livestock payments from 1 January 2005. This scheme asks you to demonstrate that you are keeping your land in a condition that complies with a number of requirements relating to the environment, public and plant health, animal health and welfare, and livestock identification and tracing. Meeting these standards is referred to as **Cross Compliance**, and most of these requirements simply reinforce existing law.

Cross Compliance is a series of standards that farmers need to meet in order to receive their subsidy payment in full. There are two main elements: **Statutory Management Requirements** and **Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition**. Farmers will be inspected to ensure that they are meeting these standards, and breaches may result in sanctions being imposed and SPS payment withheld.

Overgrazing and Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding

The importance of grazing

Through countless generations, livestock grazing has created many of our most precious landscapes and many important wildlife habitats. In many habitats, grazing helps to produce the vegetation structure and composition which are essential for valuable plant and animal life. These features are important assets and farmers are instrumental in maintaining and safeguarding them, now and in the future.

However, these habitats can also be damaged through inappropriate grazing and feeding. While insufficient grazing may result in an increase in scrub and less valuable species, heavy grazing can lead to the loss of vegetation. Poaching and compaction may also occur at these higher grazing intensities which reduce the ability of land to absorb heavy rain, can lead to erosion and local flooding and impact on water quality.



Moorland: a typical example of semi-natural vegetation managed by grazing

What are Overgrazing and Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding?

Overgrazing means grazing with so many livestock that the growth, quality or diversity of natural or semi-natural vegetation is adversely affected.

Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding means

providing supplementary feed for livestock in a way that adversely affects the quality or diversity of natural and semi-natural vegetation, through the trampling or poaching of land by livestock, or rutting caused by vehicles used to transport feed.

What is 'natural' and 'semi-natural' vegetation?

The Overgrazing and Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding controls only apply to natural or semi-natural vegetation and do not apply to the majority of agriculturally improved land.

Natural and **semi-natural** vegetation is that which is not intensively managed and is characterised by species native to the area which regenerate themselves without direct human intervention. Wildlife habitats especially re-created by man through reseeded (eg heather moorland re-creation) are also included. Examples of natural and semi-natural vegetation include: moorland (pictured left), heathland, unimproved grassland, bogs, dunes, wetlands and deciduous woodland. It would generally exclude areas which have been cultivated, or which have been agriculturally improved through regular applications of lime or fertilisers.

What are the signs of overgrazing?

Overgrazed vegetation will show signs of heavy grazing pressure which vary depending on the type of habitat.

Universal signs across the majority of habitats will be:

- Short grass heights over large areas.
- Frequent areas of bare or poached ground.
- Large amounts of dung.
- Frequent uprooted vegetation.

Unimproved grassland

In areas such as rough grazing, herb-rich hay meadows or pastures and chalk downland additional signs of overgrazing will include:

- Fewer palatable (broad-leaved) grasses.
- Fewer wild flowers.
- More coarse grass.
- An increase in moss.
- An increase in species such as thistles, daisies and plantains and, in extreme cases, species indicating disturbed or enriched soil such as nettles and annual meadow-grass.



Upland heathland in good condition

Heathland

On heather moorland and lowland heaths, additional signs of overgrazing will include:

- A gradual loss of heather or other dwarf shrubs and the break-up of heathland areas into smaller isolated patches.
- Heather with contorted growth forms (see photo below) or growing as a low-lying carpet.
- Heather with few or no flowering shoots remaining at the end of winter.
- Broken stems of older heather plants.
- Short bilberry plants (less than 10 cm) with little branching.
- An increase in coarse grasses and heath rush.



Contorted heather growth forms



Overgrazed lowland heath showing short vegetation, bare ground and stunted dwarf shrub growth

Semi-natural broad-leaved woodland



Woodland in good condition

In natural or semi-natural broad-leaved woodland additional overgrazing signs will include:

- An open understorey where the lower leaves and branches of the trees and shrubs are eaten and there is a distinct browse line.
- Few seedlings growing into saplings.
- Changes in the ground flora with sensitive species (eg brambles, bluebells, honeysuckle and ferns) disappearing and being replaced with grasses and mosses.
- Damage to trees, such as bark stripping.



Overgrazed woodland showing short ground flora, little understorey and bark-stripped trees

Good management to prevent Overgrazing

- Set stocking levels appropriate to the land, in particular taking into account the most sensitive habitats.
- Avoid overstocking, especially autumn to winter when vegetation growth is slow – use away wintering and housing where possible.
- Do not use supplementary feeding to maintain high stock levels on unproductive land except in particularly hard weather.
- Reduce grazing pressure in harsh weather conditions (prolonged drought or wet periods).
- Maintain boundary fences to control movement of stock.
- Shepherd open hill land to distribute grazing pressure evenly and avoid localised overgrazing.
- Maintain hefts / lears on open fell or moorland.
- Maintain grass and heather areas by controlling the spread of bracken.
- Control rabbit grazing.

What are the signs of Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding?

Areas of Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding will typically show:

- Extensive areas of poached or bare ground around feed sites.
- Tracking by animals.
- Surplus feed left to rot on the ground.
- Rutting by vehicles.
- Invasion by plants indicating soil disturbance or nutrient enrichment eg thistles, docks, nettles, annual meadow-grass.
- Localised heavy grazing.



Outwintering cattle in semi-natural woodland



Poaching and vehicle rutting



Localised vegetation suppression through use of ring feeders

Good management to prevent Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding

- Limit feeding on natural or semi-natural vegetation to periods of severe weather or to stock in late pregnancy.
- Avoid feeding on vegetation that is susceptible to poaching damage eg wet areas such as mires and blanket bog.
- Avoid feeding on or close to areas of heather.
- Locate feed sites more than 10 m from a water course and not on, or near, scheduled monuments.
- Avoid feeding large numbers of stock at one site, especially at field entrances.
- Avoid using ring feeders.
- Move feed locations on a regular basis.
- Use vehicles such as ATVs with low axle loading to avoid wheel rutting on vegetation.
- Feed with loose hay or haylage as opposed to silage.

What will happen if Overgrazing or Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding is taking place?

If Overgrazing or Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding is thought to be taking place, you or your graziers' association will be contacted by advisers from Natural England or the Rural Payments Agency (RPA). They will visit the area and objectively assess the vegetation to:

- a) determine whether the vegetation is natural or semi-natural; and if so,
- b) look for signs of heavy grazing pressure or unsuitable supplementary feeding damage.



Assessing vegetation for overgrazing using a quadrat

In the case of Overgrazing, field data is collected and compared to thresholds used to define heavy grazing. For Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding, an assessment is made of the vegetation, possibly with a comparison to any recovery shown the following summer.

If the site is classed as Overgrazed, or Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding is taking place, Natural England and the RPA will seek to agree changes with you in how you manage the area and provide written guidance. In the case of Overgrazing, change may be a reduction in stocking levels or change in the timing of grazing; for Unsuitable Supplementary Feeding, the advice is generally to change the feeding location or method and type of feed used. You should adhere to this guidance, which should prevent continued deterioration.

Failure to comply with any agreed management changes may result in the reduction of payments made under the Single Payment Scheme, agri-environment schemes or Hill Farm Allowance or, in extreme circumstances, exclusion from these schemes.

Environmental Stewardship

Cross Compliance provides minimum standards for agricultural land, while **Environmental Stewardship (ES)**, **Entry Level Scheme (ELS)** and **Higher Level Scheme (HLS)** pay farmers

for changes in land management to achieve environmental enhancements. These payments are only for management that goes beyond the requirements of Cross Compliance.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

If your land is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or Special Area of Conservation (SAC) you will be under certain legal obligations not to damage the wildlife interest of the site. For SSSIs this will include not carrying out Operations Likely to Damage (OLDs) without

the necessary prior consent, which may prevent you from increasing your existing stocking level. Please contact Natural England for further details (see the contact details below).

Contacts

Defra

For general information on any aspect of Defra's work, including agri-environment schemes, please contact the Defra helpline:

08459 33 55 77

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www.defra.gov.uk

For all Cross Compliance queries Defra has established a dedicated helpline, email address and website:

Cross Compliance helpline:

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ISBN 978-1-84754-037-9

Catalogue Code: NE55

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Printed on Defra Silk comprising 75% recycled fibre.