

Health Check of the Common Agricultural Policy: Wildlife and Countryside Link Position Statement On Cross Compliance

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together voluntary organisations in the UK concerned with the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practice and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production practices and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic environment and biodiversity.

Taken together, our members have the support of over eight million people in the UK and manage over 476,000 hectares of land.

This position statement is supported by the following organisations:

- Association of Rivers Trusts
- Buglife - the Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Council for British Archaeology
- Froglife
- Grasslands Trust
- Herpetological Conservation Trust
- Open Spaces Society
- Plantlife International
- Ramblers' Association
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

Commission proposal

Deletion of certain articles under the wild birds and habitats directives (SMR 1 and 5) because they are not relevant to farming activities.

Deletion of SMR 7 (identification and registration of bovine animals) because it is redundant with SMR 8.

Addition of an issue under GAEC on water, two subsequent standards added:

- *"establishment of buffer strips along water courses" in order to partly retain environmental benefits from set-aside and to contribute to water quality, as well as:*
- *"respect of authorisation procedures for using water for irrigation" in order to meet water quantity concerns.*

Elaboration of the current standard on retention of landscape features, which is now extended to specify which landscape features should be retained (hedges, ponds, ditches and trees in line, in group or isolated), and, where appropriate, field margins

in order to protect existing landscape features (which can contribute to the retention of environmental benefits from set-aside).

(Art. 4 to 6)

Link position

The Single Payment Scheme guarantees that farmers adhere to a minimum environmental and animal welfare standard through Statutory Management Requirements and Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) standards. Link believes that cross compliance has brought significant benefits to the farmed environment across Europe. Therefore, there should not be any weakening of current cross compliance conditions. Efforts should be made to widen their scope and to increase the effectiveness of the environmental objectives of cross compliance in all Member States¹.

We have concerns regarding the Defra response to the communication from the European Commission on the Health Check that there should be simplification and rationalisation of cross compliance measures. Any measures related to environmental benefits that are proposed for deletion should be fully assessed for their beneficial effects before being removed.

Link has serious concerns about the environmental consequences of the proposed deletion of some of the Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs). We are particularly concerned at the proposed deletion of certain articles of the Wild Birds (SMR1) and Habitats and Species (SMR 5) Directives, in particular articles 7 and 8 from SMR1. These articles cover hunting of wild bird species and Link is concerned that their deletion will remove a valuable deterrent against illegal persecution of certain bird species on farmland. Birds of prey in particular still face high levels of illegal persecution in the UK. The deletion of SMRs 1 and 5 undermines the responsibility of farmers for protecting of ecosystem services which includes the protection of important wildlife habitats and species present on farmland.

Link has been calling for some time for the scope of cross compliance to encompass a wider range of environmental and landscape features on farmed land. Link is pleased that the amendments to Annex III now include references to hedges, ponds, ditches, trees in a line, group or in isolation and field margins. Improved management of a number of these features will contribute to reducing diffuse pollution and increase habitat connectivity. However, the UK has already included many of these features under its cross compliance conditions and it is important that Defra makes a strong case to Commission that all Member States should take a more progressive approach to cross compliance; and this could be linked to the encouragement the Health Check gives to moving towards flatter rate regional payments. These will have a closer association with environmental standards than historic payment systems. Link believes that there is scope to further amend Annex III (previously Annex IV of Council Regulation 1782/2003). For example, to include protection for all types of field boundaries including dry stone walls and hedge banks, ancient woodland, veteran trees, traditional orchards, and historic environment features. Cross

¹ Farmer and Swales (2004), The development and implementation of cross compliance in the EU15: an analysis, IEEP report for the RSPB; Swales (2007), The likely effects of cross compliance on the environment, A Research Paper of the Cross Compliance Network; Farmer and Swales (2007), Future options for cross compliance, A Research Paper of the Cross Compliance Network, Deliverable 23

compliance should be extended to ensure a baseline of protection is provided for these features.

Currently the standard listed in Annex IV on '*Avoiding the encroachment of unwanted vegetation on agricultural land*' restricts Member State's ability to mitigate the deterioration of certain habitat patches resulting from damaging adjacent intensive agriculture, and it thus actually acts in contradiction to the spirit of the Annex. In the UK it prevents the buffering and expansion of certain habitats which would increase their resilience and help mitigate and adapt to climate impacts. For example, buffering and expansion of habitats should include scrub mosaics targeted on arable and improved grassland adjacent to woodland. Link believes amendments should be made that allows for some scrub encroachment in these cases where it is environmentally beneficial to assist in the expansion and connection of habitats and thereby also helping to deliver Article 10 of the EU Habitats & Species Directive.

Permanent grassland, where it is wet or unimproved, can be one of the most important farmed habitats in the EU for biodiversity and for the protection of archaeological sites, and it is also an important carbon sink². The UK should ensure that cross compliance is strengthened to ensure permanent grassland is protected where there are benefits for biodiversity, historic environment features and landscape. It is unacceptable that this precious resource is not properly protected through cross compliance.

Link would also like consideration to be given to extend cross compliance to include new legislative standards for animal welfare, for example those contained within the Broiler Directive and Laying Hens Directive.

² JRC & EEA (2006) Proceedings of the expert consultation "Sustainable bioenergy cropping systems for the Mediterranean", Madrid, 9-10 February 2006; Vellinga, V; A. van den Pol-van Dasselaar and P.J. Kuikman (2005), The impact of grassland ploughing on CO₂ and N₂O emissions in the Netherlands. *Nutrient Cycling in Agroecosystems* 70: 33 – 45.; Freibauer, A; M.D.A. Rounsevell, P. Smith, A. Verhagen, Carbon sequestration in European agricultural soils, *Soil Science Review*, 2004.