

## Wildlife and Countryside Link statement on the launch of the new Environmental Stewardship Agri-Environment scheme

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production 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 7 million people in the UK and manage over 398,000 hectares of land. This statement is supported by the Bat Conservation Trust, Buglife – the Invertebrate Conservation Trust, Butterfly Conservation, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Council for British Archaeology, Council for National Parks, The Herpetological Conservation Trust, National Federation of Badger Groups, The National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Wildlife Trusts and the Woodland Trust.

Link welcomes the introduction of the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme. We are proud to have played a part in developing the scheme through our place on the Agri-Environment Steering Group and on many of the scheme option working groups that provided advice and guidance throughout the development of Environmental Stewardship. As members of the steering and technical working groups, Link worked in co-operation with DEFRA, Government agencies and our partner organisations, to create a scheme that has the potential to deliver tangible environmental benefits. This will be achieved through funding sustainable management of our landscapes, wildlife habitats (including, for the first time, a full suite of woodland options), public rights of way, historic environment and our soil and water resources.

In particular Link welcomes the introduction of Entry Level Stewardship (ELS). This inclusive and exciting new approach means for the first time there is an opportunity for nearly all the farmed land in England to be entered into an agri-environment scheme, giving the potential for landscape scale improvements. The creation of such a scheme was one of the most important recommendations of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food and was a key proposal in the evidence that Link presented to the Commission. ELS aims to deliver simple but effective land management beyond the basic good practice demanded by the cross compliance requirements of the new Single Payment Scheme. The benefit ELS delivers will be greatest if farmers choose a mix of options which best suit the environmental interest on their farm. Following reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the changes to the way farming is funded, Entry Level Stewardship will send a powerful message that in the future, the way farming is funded will increasingly be dependent on the protection, maintenance and enhancement of the countryside across whole landscapes.

Link believes that that in order to deliver the public benefits that the scheme aims to secure, the Government must ensure adequate funding is guaranteed for the scheme in the long term. This will ensure that the public and an increasingly greater area of countryside can benefit from all the land management options the scheme contains.

Link wishes the Environmental Stewardship Scheme all success and we would like to thank DEFRA for the opportunity it provided to Link to help develop the scheme.

We look forward to continuing to work with DEFRA, its agencies and our partner organisations in ensuring the scheme continues to play a vital role in enabling farmers to protect, enhance and maintain the countryside.

Wildlife and Countryside Link, March 2005

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