

Briefings for MEPs on CAP Reform

#4 High Nature Value Farming



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INTRODUCTION

High Nature Value (HNV) farming is a term which is used to describe the low-intensity farming systems upon which the survival of many of our iconic species, habitats and landscape in the UK are dependent. These systems also provide a host of wider benefits for society including carbon storage, the protection of water resources and the maintenance of landscape character and cultural heritage. Many of the UK's upland farms would be classified as HNV, as would many of Scotland's crofting systems. Examples in the lowlands tend to be at a smaller scale and in locations where physical constraints have prevented wholesale intensification.

Despite the vital services they provide and their cultural value, HNV farming systems do not receive adequate public support and many are threatened. Existing support mechanisms such as agri-environment have helped to slow the loss of these systems, but are typically insufficient to make HNV farms commercially viable. A strong package of support is urgently needed in the next CAP period if these systems, and the incredible wildlife they sustain, are not to be lost forever.

WHAT IS HIGH NATURE VALUE FARMING?

HNV farming is intrinsically valuable for biodiversity because of the agricultural practices associated with the system. In Europe, landscapes have been shaped by human activities over millennia, and

many plant and animal species have co-evolved to be dependent on low-intensity agriculture. As farming systems have intensified - partly as a result of previous damaging CAP policies – much of this wildlife has been lost. However, some low intensity farming systems remain which support a great variety of species, including those which have disappeared from the wider countryside, whose survival now hangs in the balance.

WHAT IS HNV FARMING IN THE UK?

Whilst there are several 'types' of HNV farming in the UK, the most prevalent type is associated with upland areas and crofting systems where the climate, topography and geology have imposed constraints on farming type. As a result, extensive livestock production, in some cases with limited cropping, predominates in these areas. It is characterised by:

- A high reliance on semi-natural vegetation for grazing
- Low stocking densities
- Calves and lambs that are produced in spring and mainly sold for fattening elsewhere

Other characteristics often include:

- Use of traditional livestock breeds
- A high diversity of land cover and landscape features like hedgerows and trees which increase nature value

- Remote geographical locations and resulting economic challenges, such as difficulty accessing markets

Low-intensity HNV farming of this type faces enormous challenges of socio-economic viability and at the farm level, stark choices are being made between abandonment and intensification.¹ Although there is no official breakdown of income for HNV farms, research has shown² that the financial position of HNV farms is likely to be even worse than for Less Favoured Area farms in general – which on average are typified by low incomes and high dependence on public support payments.

Outside the uplands and crofting landscapes, low intensity farming is found at a smaller scale throughout the UK and is associated with farming which maintains a high proportion of semi-natural features (such as hedgerows, ponds, patches of woodland and arable margins).

Similarly, HNV farming systems are pivotal in managing the farmland in the UK which is home to rare species and/or important populations of species. There is also a pressing need to ensure that these low-intensity farming practices can survive in these areas and thus contribute to the survival of this wildlife.

¹ Beaufoy, G., 'HNV Farming: Explaining the concept and interpreting EU and national policy commitments (www.efncp.org/download/EFNCP-HNV-farming-concept.pdf)

² For example, Swales and Moxey (2008), 'Targeting CAP support at HNV farming and crofting systems'

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HOW IS HNV FARMING CURRENTLY COVERED IN EU POLICY?

Member States have existing commitments relating to HNV farming:

- Supporting HNV farming and forestry systems is an objective of the European Commission in current Rural Development Programmes (RDPs)
- HNV farming indicators are part of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) for RDPs. Member States are obliged to develop a system of 'impact indicators' for assessing the extent and condition of HNV farmland

However, these policies are currently failing HNV farming systems and economic pressures continue to force farmers to intensify land management and production, or abandon it altogether. The current proposals for CAP reform will do nothing to stem the loss of HNV farming. However, simple changes could still be made to the proposals which would secure the future of these systems, the wildlife that depends on them and the valuable services they provide, for a relatively small proportion of the CAP budget.

³ For example, we propose Article 38 on Coupled Support could be amended to become 'Coupled and other specific forms of support' and a rule should be added for specific support of HNV (or semi-natural) pastures.

⁴ Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) in the new CAP proposals.

⁵ For example, Rural Analysis Associates (2011), 'Defining the Vulnerable Areas of Scotland: A report for the Highland and Island Councils'.

WHAT ACTION CAN MEPs TAKE?

While agri-environment schemes do play a part in helping to maintain HNV farming, they are insufficient in isolation to secure the future of these systems as they are limited as a result of 'income foregone/costs incurred' constraints. What is needed is a package of support measures, which would include:

- Support within Pillar I targeted at HNV farms, to support and reward the exceptional public benefits HNV farms provide. This is needed urgently. It could take the form of a premium for 'High Nature Value' pastures introduced as a new Article in the Direct Payments Regulation³ and would work in a similar way to the current Article 68 approach.
- This should be complemented by Pillar II measures such as well funded agri-environment schemes and the targeting of 'Areas of Natural Constraint' (ANC) payments to farms which deliver the most public benefits.

- In those areas of the UK where they are applicable, Less Favoured Area payments⁴ made according to more environmentally specific eligibility criteria. For example, the current Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) in Scotland results in higher payments going to more productive, less disadvantaged areas in the LFA, counter to the spirit of the EU regulations, and should be replaced with a scheme targeted at the most vulnerable farming areas.⁵



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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WHO WE ARE

The UK's four Link organisations (the Joint Links) represent a suite of bodies working for the conservation, enjoyment and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management and food production, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of landscapes and their features, the historic environment and biodiversity. We have been working together for many years to try and ensure that the CAP delivers all that it can for the countryside whilst rewarding those who embrace this responsibility in their management of the land.



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