

A new agri-environment scheme for Shetland

Agriculture and the Environment in Shetland

Low-intensity agricultural practices have contributed to creating and maintaining a distinctive landscape and rich natural environment in Shetland. Nationally important populations of breeding birds including priority species such as curlew and lapwing depend on these practices, as do extensive areas of flower-rich habitats and associated invertebrates and significant areas of blanket bog - a globally rare habitat and major carbon sink. There is also a vibrant and diverse community of farmers and crofters in Shetland. The farming and environmental community is dedicated to maintaining and improving the Shetland environment, on which the food and tourism sectors heavily rely.

Agri-environment schemes in Shetland

A high level of interest from farmers and crofters in Shetland for agri-environment schemes was demonstrated in the ESA years: 120,000 ha was entered in the scheme, bringing an annual income of up to £2m in the local economy. In contrast, less than 10,000 ha is managed under AECS options. As of the end of 2018, 32 units benefit from agri-environment support in AECS compared to 724 ESA agreements in 2000. Barriers to uptake include the complexity and competitiveness of recent schemes, the difficulty for small units to apply, the deficit in agent capacity, the blanket measures which do not suit the specific climate and biophysical conditions in Shetland and the lack of recognition and support for ongoing nature-friendly management by farmers and crofters delivering significant public goods.



**Information provided by Scottish Government. SRDP - Rural Priorities (RP) scheme opened in 2008. The area in RP options is missing for the 2009-2014 period.*

The future of agri-environment schemes in Shetland

The Shetland Agri-Environment Group was set up in August 2018 when members of Shetland's environmental and farming community that shared an interest in farming for nature met up to look at how future agri-environment schemes could be improved to best serve both the environment and crofters and farmers. There is a consensus within the group that continued agri-environment support in Shetland is needed, and a willingness to work together to ensure a meaningful scheme is put in place.

- We have designed a short survey to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the previous and current agri-environment schemes. We wish to implement a scheme which addresses genuine needs and delivers effective results in the future.
- Piloting an outcome-based approach

Unlike in management-based schemes, outcome-based schemes provide farmers with the flexibility to choose the most appropriate management to achieve an agreed result. They receive payment according to the success of their management, based on a series of indicators. This type of scheme – or results-based payment - is already in place in several areas in Europe and the UK.

Scottish Natural Heritage is currently funding facilitators in four areas in Scotland (Skye, Argyll, Strathspey and East Lothian) to deliver three workshops to assess the potential for outcome-based schemes in Scotland before March 2020. We have been in contact with SNH. Although we can't receive funding, SNH is interested in a Shetland input in the project, with an aim to possibly become a fifth project area and pilot measures on the ground from spring 2020, if funding from Scottish Government becomes available. We need to get involved as soon as possible if we want to have a say in future agri-environment schemes. The RSPB will initially provide funding to run the workshops here. We will need a group of 10-15 crofters and farmers to take part in 3 workshops this winter.

Michael Davoren is a farmer from the Burren in Ireland, where one of the first outcome-based schemes was set up. He will be visiting Shetland on 13-15 September, with Gwyn Jones, from the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism. He has been involved in setting up and running several results-based projects. We are planning a talk, probably on the Friday evening. It will be an opportunity to meet a farmer who has a long experience of outcome-based schemes and their development on the ground. We are looking for suggestions on how to make the most of their visit. Please get in touch with any idea. We will then organise the first workshop soon after.

If you want to discuss this project, please get in touch with Nathalie Pion (RSPB Conservation Advisor) on nathalie.pion@rspb.org.uk or 01950 460800.