

# Life after set-aside



*Marjoram in set-aside 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007*

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## Foreword

This paper follows the previously published document "A strategy for the creation of biodiverse meadow grassland in arable areas" which was first published by [www.ukagriculture.com](http://www.ukagriculture.com) on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2003. This was republished on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2005 with revised recommendations following the introduction of the Entry Level and Higher Level Schemes (ELS and HLS respectively).

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- Advance the education of the public in all aspects of agriculture, the countryside and the rural economy
- Promote greater public understanding of the role of agriculture
- Conserve and protect for the benefit of the public the countryside as a whole



*Pyramid orchids in set-aside 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007*

## Summary

This paper looks at the way in which some farmers have managed their set-aside to create important habitats for wildlife on their farms and estimates that around 20,000 hectares of this has become particularly biodiverse.

For the 2008 farming year it looks as though farmers will not be obliged to set-aside any of their land and much of this biodiverse habitat could be returned to arable cropping or to more intensive grassland.

Such a move would not only see the loss of important habitats, but be a somewhat perverse outcome when farmers are simultaneously being encouraged to create exactly the same.

This paper calls on Defra and Natural England to vary the existing Entry Level Scheme by allowing farmers to add ex set-aside habitat, over and above the current ceiling for the scheme. We suggest the creation of a new option for arable land named "Life after Set-Aside".

Such a scheme would cost relatively little and save precious habitats that are set amongst productive arable land in the heart of one of the world's most densely populated countries.



*Biodiverse set-aside 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007*

## The End of Set-Aside?

The long-term decline of meadow grassland throughout the UK over the last fifty years has led to a loss of one of the UK's most biodiverse farmland ecosystems. Meadows now have little economic or practical rationale in modern farming systems and some commentators suggest that their recreation could take as long as half a century.

Attempts to stem the decline through arable to grassland reversion schemes have been only partly successful. These have reached the point where farmers are reluctant to commit additional land for fear of a number of factors, most notably:

- The risk that the field becomes classified as permanent grassland and therefore subject to EIA regulations restricting its long term future use.
- The risk that the field is classified as a SINC or some other designation further restricts its use.
- The risk that a long term commitment to an environmental scheme may not be rewarding financially at a time of rising prices.

However, on a much larger scale and to some extent unnoticed, biodiverse grassland has been establishing itself on set-aside land.



*Biodiverse set-aside 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007*

The introduction of set aside in 1993 forced farmers to divert a proportion of their arable land to non food uses, some of which was managed by the sowing of permanent green cover. Over time, areas of this land have become much more biodiverse so that they now represent a very important habitat.

In 2006 there were just over 500,000 hectares of set aside of which we estimate that around 20,000 hectares had become particularly valuable habitat supporting a wide range of flora and fauna.

For the 2008 farming year, it looks as though the set-aside rate will be set at zero and farmers will be able to do as they please with their set-aside land. Since set-aside that has been planted with a permanent green cover will be sitting idle and without any kind of financial return, farmers are likely to consider turning it to more productive use. This could mean a return to arable cropping or the application of fertiliser to encourage grass growth. On both counts this will lead to a loss of biodiversity and raises the prospect of many thousands of hectares of

valuable habitat being lost. This is a somewhat perverse scenario as farmers are being simultaneously encouraged to create new habitat through the Entry Level Scheme (ELS).



*A field corner, managed under ELS adjoining oilseed rape*

For those farmers who have used permanent set-aside to encourage biodiversity on their farms, the decision to revert a valuable habitat to more productive use will be difficult. However there may be few alternatives.

It is likely that the same farmers who have managed their set-aside to create biodiverse habitats will have already embraced the ELS fully and therefore be unable to add their set-aside land to this scheme. The alternative Higher Level Scheme might provide a solution for some who are on the verge of adopting it, but it is bureaucratic by nature and entry into the scheme is particularly protracted.

It is somewhat ironic therefore, that farmers who have been widely criticised for growing "weeds" under the set-aside regime, are now likely to be criticised for destroying the same "weeds" even though the regime has finished. For the industry this is bad news; once again it will be open to the charge that is damaging the environment.



*Biodiverse set-aside as a 20 metre margin 1<sup>st</sup> August 2007*

## **Life after Set-Aside**

Over the past decade many farmers have been quietly working (despite counter productive rules) to create valuable habitat on their set-aside. It would surely be madness for policy makers to call for an end to set-aside now without putting in place an environmental scheme to capture some of the valuable habitat that it has created. At the moment no such scheme exists.

Time is pressing. Defra and Natural England need to have in place some kind of scheme that will be working at the time that farmers are deciding on the future use of their set-aside. We propose the following.

Defra and Natural England should vary the existing Entry Level Scheme by allowing farmers to add ex set-aside habitat, over and above the current ceiling for the scheme. We suggest the creation of a new option for arable land named "Life after Set-Aside".

Land incorporated would be managed to maximise biodiversity. The following rules would apply:

1. Grazing by the farmer's own livestock would be allowed between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 31<sup>st</sup> March providing it did not poach the ground.
2. Farmers would be required to top, or preferably cut hay from the land in August.
3. No artificial inputs would be allowed.

The area allowed into the scheme would be unrestricted and would pay farmers at the rate of £400 per hectare (similar to many of the ELS options that take arable land out of production). This would provide some incentive to maintain these valuable habitats at a time when commodity prices are rising and farmland profitability is growing.

If some 10,000 hectares of land could be encouraged to join the Life after Set-Aside scheme, the annual cost would amount to £4 million. We believe this to be a very small price for the preservation of 100 square kilometres of biodiverse habitat set amongst productive arable land in the heart of one of the world's most densely populated countries.

We urge Defra and Natural England to consider this proposal urgently.