



Game & Wildlife  
CONSERVATION TRUST  
*Scotland*

# Shaping future agri-environment schemes

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Agri-environment schemes – the support mechanisms that help farmers implement more advanced wildlife-friendly management plans – are changing. Government policy in Scotland is likely to require at least 50% of farm payments to be based on environmental outcomes from 2025. So, for example, if a farmer should choose to include hedgerow management in their plan in future, they will probably have to provide evidence as to whether the actions taken have delivered a hedge likely to support a range of wildlife. Deciding what that evidence will look like and how it is collected is a key part of trials that NatureScot is currently running. And, of course, hedgerows are just one element on the farm that might be assessed.

This isn't as easy as it sounds because what constitutes good management for one species might not be good for others, so understanding multiple outcomes could be difficult,

and any system has got to be reasonably easy to implement if it is going to be successful. At our Interreg-funded PARTRIDGE demonstration farm at Balgonie we have monitored a range of indicator species over a number of years whilst also creating and managing new flower blocks designed to support farmland wildlife, so we may be able to help advise on what to expect from such habitat changes and how best to measure wildlife responses.

The PARTRIDGE project is focusing on how to improve agri-environment schemes across Europe by demonstrating how the options available in the schemes might be improved and/or better used. We have also surveyed the opinions of hundreds of farmers across each partner country to gauge experiences and attitudes regarding these schemes and farmland conservation in general. It will be no surprise to this readership that a high

proportion of those farmers surveyed thought that conservation of wildlife on their land was a high priority, but there were many concerns raised about agri-environment schemes. Suffice to say, we would advise those devising the next generation of schemes to make them more accessible, flexible and with easy access to free advice from the application process and throughout the resulting management agreement.

We also think the flower blocks currently being demonstrated across the European farms would make an excellent new option. Dare I say, they have already been adopted in the English scheme. These flower blocks consist of multi-species crop mixes providing a range of resources throughout the year that would help support a suite of farmland biodiversity, whilst remaining flexible and adaptable to each farm's (and farmer's) requirements. A rare win-win for farmers and biodiversity.