



HOW TO IMPROVE AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEME UPTAKE AND PROVISION

National report Scotland

Written by Fiona Torrance, Farmland Biodiversity Advisor at Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust in Scotland

A large online survey of land managers (primarily farmers) across the North Sea Region was carried out as part of the PARTRIDGE project. A key element of PARTRIDGE is the need to improve the existing Agri-Environment schemes (AE schemes) and widen farmers' uptake of them throughout the North Sea area. The target group of this survey was arable farmers in areas where arable AE schemes were available. Here we present the findings concerning the responses of Scottish farmers. The report of results across all PARTRIDGE partner countries can be found online at <https://northsearegion.eu/partridge/output-library/> which has a more detailed explanation of the methods, the survey questions, and the overall results.

ADVICE

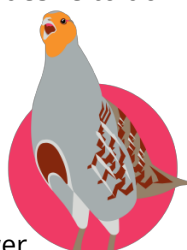
Scottish farmers participating in AE schemes (53%) were more likely to think they should pay for advice compared to 35% of participants without AE schemes, where a majority felt that the government should pay. A higher percentage (68%) of people in both camps wanted to get advice from non-governmental advisors but a lot of people also wanted to get it from farmer clusters (43% without an AE scheme and 59% with one), perhaps indicating that farmers prefer to get advice from their peers.

In terms of how frequently land managers wanted to receive this advice, the majority of both groups (65% no AE scheme and 40% with an AE scheme) stated that they would prefer to receive advice when they requested it, rather than once a year (14% and 30%) or at other times (0% and 11%). When they did receive advice, respondents were most keen on receiving advice on¹ the environmental benefits of AE schemes, how AE schemes benefit wildlife, and how measures can be practically managed. A visible contrast between land managers with and without AE schemes was that participants without schemes seemed to be more concerned with legal aspects of measures (47% compared to 18%).

OPTION CHOICE: FLEXIBILITY AND DESIGN

When it came to flexibility¹, most Scottish participants wanted greater flexibility in changing the location of measures and the control of pernicious weeds. Of note was the difference in opinions of land managers with and without AE schemes, with far more participants without AE schemes (73%) wanting more flexibility in the use of herbicides compared to those within a scheme (42%). In contrast to this, more land managers (86%) with an AE scheme wanted improved flexibility in when you could mow, compared to only 59% of people without AE schemes. More people within a scheme (60%) also preferred more flexibility in how mown grass is used, compared with only 32% of people without an AE scheme. Both groups wanted greater flexibility in the seed mixes allowed, the locations where measures are placed and when derogations from the rules are required.

The most popular options that people in AE schemes had and that people not in AE schemes would take up¹, were floristically enhanced grass margins, rotational wild bird cover, methods for predation management and supplementary feeding (all selected by over 50% of respondents). This included people not participating in AE schemes who seemed to have a desire to do more but felt they could not.



Interreg
North Sea Region
PARTRIDGE

European Regional Development Fund



EUROPEAN UNION

¹ Indicates respondents could select more than one answer

CONTRACT FLEXIBILITY

A big difference between land managers with and without AE schemes was their opinions on contract length. The majority of participants with AE schemes (60%) preferred contracts of medium length (five to ten years) while those without schemes preferred agreements on the shorter side of the spectrum (annual, short and medium).

PREDATION MANAGEMENT

Predator management was something the majority of respondents felt should be included, with 89% of Scottish land managers indicating so. In terms of specific measures, most people (90%) thought that this should include lethal legal predator control, although a large proportion were also in favour of increasing habitat blocks to at least 1ha in size (48%) and using fencing to protect nests (57%). Having wider strips was more popular with participants that had AE schemes (40%) than those without (25%).

LEGISLATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

The most common reasons Scottish people took part in AE schemes¹ was to help the environment (86%), to help the flora and fauna on their land (86%) and for shooting purposes (61%). Interestingly, 59% of people who did not participate in an AE scheme stated they established measures for free themselves, suggesting an appetite for habitat improvement but perhaps some reluctance to get involved with the AE system.

We also asked respondents who were not in AE schemes what could be done to encourage them to sign up¹. Over 75% of respondents indicated that more flexibility in the management of the options (e.g., ploughing dates, weed control), more options that fitted with their farm, more flexible contracts, and more recognition from society, would encourage them to apply.

REMUNERATION

Overall respondents were broadly in agreement about what aspects should be covered when payment for AE schemes is calculated. This included the effort required (63%), habitat quality (58%) and income forgone (65%), although a higher proportion of people in AE schemes selected effort required as of importance, suggesting that this group feel effort is more important, compared to those without an AE scheme, where only 53% considered this important.

Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of Scottish participants, both with and without AE schemes, felt that the payment level for the wild bird seed mix option was adequate for what was needed. However, when this was explored in more detail, participants indicated that the payment should be in the range of £775-£875 per ha. At the time of the survey the actual payment level was closer to £555, indicating that not all respondents were aware of the current rate.

Scottish respondents with and without AE schemes were in general agreement about who should pay for such measures, with the majority indicating that national government should finance them¹. A difference between the two was that more people with AE schemes (32%) said that the private sector could pay, perhaps indicating a commercial interest or awareness in biodiversity offsetting.



¹ Indicates respondents could select more than one answer.