



HOW TO IMPROVE AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEME UPTAKE AND PROVISION

National report England

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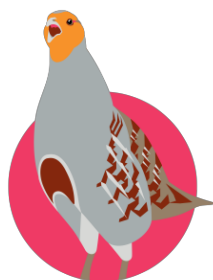
A large online survey of farmers across the North Sea Region was carried out as part of the PARTRIDGE project. A key element of PARTRIDGE is the need to improve the existing Agri-Environment schemes (AE schemes) and widen farmers' uptake of AE schemes throughout the North Sea area. The target group of this survey was arable farmers in areas where arable AE schemes were available. Here we present the findings concerning the responses of English 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

Three-quarters¹ of farmers in England wanted to have advice on AE scheme option choice, on practical management of measures, and on environmental benefits of options. Over half wanted advice on the financial implications of AE schemes and information on how the AE schemes benefit arable wildlife. Most English farmers (52%¹) thought the government should pay for advice to farmers when they joined an AE scheme, but a significant proportion (46%¹) said that the farmer should pay. When asked directly if they would pay for advice, a majority did say that they would be willing to (57%). Those in an AE scheme were more willing to pay (64%), compared to just over 40% of respondents who did not have an AE scheme. Many were concerned about the cost of this advice and thought it should be included in an AE scheme agreement or that the cost should be met through governmental support. We asked farmers where they preferred to get their advice. Only 20%¹ of English respondents wanted advice from governmental advisors. The most popular advisors were those employed by wildlife charities or farmer organisations – two-thirds¹ of English farmers wanted to get their advice from them, while just over half¹ of respondents said they would like advice from the advisors for a farmer cluster. The majority (55%) of English farmers wanted to get advice when they requested it, although 20% wanted advice yearly.

OPTION CHOICE: FLEXIBILITY AND DESIGN

Flexibility in both option management and design was important to English respondents. In general, most of the English respondents wanted more flexibility in pesticide use, mowing, sowing date, seed mixtures, AE scheme location, contract length, and types of options. The control of pernicious weeds, with the possibility to change option location or the use of herbicides to control them, was important to most English farmers. For those options that require mowing, over half of respondents said they wanted flexibility in dates of first mowing and the number of times they needed to mow. Over half of English farmers wanted flexibility in sowing dates, the ability to control weeds chemically before sowing and to be able to use fertilisers on options. For seed mixes, respondents wanted to have the ability to choose their own mixes (from a prescribed list), receive additional funding for more expensive mixes and to be able to choose from a list of predefined mixes.



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¹ Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.

Over 80% of English respondents thought it should be possible to receive a derogation from the rules to change the location of an option to address a problem, for example pernicious weeds, adjust sowing dates in the case of drought or unusually wet conditions, and to increase the wildlife value of an option.

Options that were most popular – with farmers in AE schemes reporting having them or farmers not in AE schemes saying they would like to take them up were: floristically enhanced grass margins, permanent wild-flower cover, supplementary overwinter food for wintering birds, stubbles with cover crops and unharvested cereals.

CONTRACT FLEXIBILITY

Overall, 63% of English farmers thought that the length of contracts should be flexible with particular emphasis given on the duration of contract, with a larger percentage (78%) of those who were not in AE schemes wanting flexibility in the length of contracts. Among all farmers who wanted flexibility in contract length, 7% wanted to have annual contracts – although 20% of farmers without AE schemes wanted these short contracts. Among all farmers, 35% wanted shorter length contracts of less than 5 years and 40% wanted medium length contracts between five to ten years old, with the tendency for farmers who were not in an AE scheme preferring shorter contracts. Eight percent of those in AE schemes wanted contracts of at least ten years.

PREDATION MANAGEMENT

Eighty-six percent of English farmers thought that more predation management should be available through AE schemes, 7% thought that it was not necessary, with 8% having no opinion. Of those farmers who wanted support for predation management 88%² wanted support for legal, lethal predator control, 55% were interested in fencing for nest protection, 47% wanted payment to plant habitat options in blocks of at least 1ha and 37% thought an increase in the width of strips (>20 meters) should be supported.

LEGISLATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

Over three-quarters of English farmers would be more likely to join AE schemes if there was more flexibility in the management of options, if there were AE options that fit the conditions of their farm, less administration, if the payment was reliably paid, more flexible contracts and if the options would result in more wild game and they were assured there would be no long-term legal restrictions when the AE scheme contract finished. Half of those not in an AE scheme said that they already did measures for the environment for free.

REMUNERATION

Most of the respondents from England thought that funding for AE schemes should come from the taxpayer, i.e., from governmental support². Over half also thought funding should come from private sources (biodiversity credits, etc.), 30% from consumers and 21% from agri-business². In England, over half of farmers thought the effort required to establish and maintain the habitat and income forgone should be included in the calculation of payments, with many also reporting a desire for an element of payment by results – with higher quality habitat attracting a higher payment. We asked our respondents what they thought of the payment level available for wild bird seed mix. Half of English farmers surveyed thought the payment level was too low, with a suggested 34% increase in the payment provided.

² Respondents could choose more than one response to this question.

