

4. Agriculture and rural land use

Who does what?

- The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Welsh Office Agriculture Department are responsible for national policy. They administer several schemes to control and support farming and promote environmental protection and improvement. Examples include the Beef Premium Scheme, Organic Aid Scheme, Environmentally Sensitive Area Schemes, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, Habitat Scheme and Tir Cymen. Local authorities may own farmland eligible for County Smallholding Schemes.
- Agricultural Development Advisory Service (England) and Countryside Information Advisory Service (Wales) provide advice to farmers on agricultural practices and the above incentive schemes.
- Internal drainage boards have a duty to exercise general supervision over all matters relating to the drainage of land within their districts. They are also empowered to carry out work on all watercourses within their area.
- Who does what in relation to recreational use of the countryside is included in chapter 6 on recreation and tourism.

Stated Government aims

- To integrate environmental and economic activity in rural areas.
- To conserve and improve the landscape and encourage opportunities for recreation.
- To give extra protection to areas of special value.
- To conserve the diversity of Britain's wildlife, particularly by protecting habitats.
- To provide scientific monitoring and research to support these aims.

Background

The MAFF Agricultural Land Classification System categorises land into 5 grades; grade 1 land has virtually no limitation on its use for agricultural purposes whilst grade 4 and grade 5 could be described as poor and very poor from an agricultural point of view. Grades 2 and 3 are deemed worthy of special protection because of their productivity for a wide variety of crops. Most of the land around the estuary is grade 3, although there are some significant areas of grade 2. There are only very small areas of the other grades, i.e. the majority is good quality farmland.

Agriculture is the most common use of the land around the estuary although this is declining gradually as the urban areas expand and recreational uses develop.

Approximately two thirds of the agricultural land is grassland, traditionally pasture, although this is declining as grassland is turned into cropland and woodland.

Much of the agricultural land around the estuary is low lying, such as that on the Somerset Levels and around Slimbridge, the Gwent Levels and the Avon Levels. These areas were reclaimed for pasture and are drained by a network of ditches.

Much of the area of saltmarsh on the estuary (over 900 hectares) forms a narrow coastal strip which is grazed and contains some diverse and rare plant communities. In the course of the last five centuries, saltmarsh in the UK has dwindled from 1000 to 450 sq. km. Saltmarsh plants provide a natural 'buffer' of coastal defence. Sediment from the estuary waters will accumulate in the vegetation of the saltmarsh. The area of the saltmarsh, governed to some extent by its management, i.e. grazing and land reclamation, will in turn affect the area of the mudflats beyond.

Farmers are seen as the natural custodians and trustees of the rural environment. Farmers who care for their environment and its wildlife, supply a benefit to society which cannot be measured in monetary terms. However, farmers are subject to many pressures to change their farming practices and to maintain financial viability.

Several thousand people work in agriculture around the estuary and in the rural areas it is a significant employer. However, the number of jobs in agriculture is declining, as it is nationally. In addition to those directly employed there are also people working in ancillary industries such as servicing, processing, and professional services which means that agriculture still provides a significant contribution to the economy of the area.

Internal drainage boards

Internal drainage boards operate in low-lying areas of England and Wales where flood protection and land drainage are necessary to sustain agricultural and developed land use. This often requires pumped drainage to evacuate water. Boards consist of members elected by agricultural rate payers for a three year term. Elected members must be owners or occupiers of land within the district. Local authorities may contribute to a board's costs and are then able to nominate members.

Although their powers are permissive in practice, most Boards designate certain watercourses in their area upon which to carry out regular maintenance.

While the initial thrust for internal drainage boards was agricultural drainage, in recent years substantial development has taken place in many districts. With many internal drainage boards a significant amount of their work is now to provide adequate standards of flood protection through pumping stations and channel systems to urbanised areas including major industrial complexes such as Avonmouth.

Many issues in this report are related to one another. Issues raised in this chapter have particular links with those in chapters 3, 12, 13, and 15.

RURAL MANAGEMENT PLANNING AND INITIATIVES

R1 Representation of farming interests in management planning

Farmers and land managers are keen to ensure that their interests are represented in discussions about the future management of land. Farmers feel that they are under pressure from many different groups with differing objectives for land management; for example nature conservation, landscape enhancement and archaeological protection. Farmers feel that they should be more fully involved in such management plans as they are the professional and traditional land managers. If farmers are not properly involved these management schemes will be less successful.

Who is involved: Landowners and farmers, Country Landowners Association, National Farmers Union, English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Countryside Commission, local authorities, MAFF, the Environment Agency, wildlife groups.

What is happening: The Severn Estuary Strategy Group is working to ensure that farming interests are properly represented and involved in Working Groups.

R2 Participation of farmers in diversification schemes

There are significant financial pressures on farmers to develop new sources of income and diversify their activities. These activities include bed and breakfast, craft centres, local produce shops and exhibitions and museums. Many of these are linked to tourism and recreational use of the countryside. There is concern that diversification schemes can have an adverse impact on the countryside, through increases in traffic, and possible damage to important landscapes and fragile ecosystems.

Who is involved: English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service, Agricultural Development Advisory Service (ADAS), MAFF, WOAD and Wildlife Trusts.

What is happening: ADAS, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group give advice to farmers about the procedures necessary to implement suitable diversification schemes and need to be aware of potential funding sources.

R3 Participation of farmers in conservation initiatives

Farmers are being encouraged to enter schemes to improve the nature conservation value of the countryside. Many of these involve the farmers spending money or not getting maximum financial profit from the land. Most of the schemes encourage farmers and compensate them for these costs/ losses. However, some farmers believe that the financial incentives for conservation initiatives are inadequate.

Who is involved: English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service, Agricultural Development Advisory Service, and Wildlife Trusts.

Some suggestions: Further promote Countryside Stewardship, extend Tir Cymen and other similar schemes. Consideration could also be given to achieving more effective co-ordination of schemes.

R4 The threat of development to rural life

There is widespread concern about the encroachment of towns and cities on the countryside, both physically through the loss of land but also through noise and disturbance. In particular rural communities are concerned about increases in industrial and housing developments, increased pressure for transport facilities and the negative effects of tourism.

Who is involved: Local planning authorities, local interest groups.

What is happening: Through the development plan system, local authorities seek to protect rural areas.

Some suggestions: Consideration could be given to further consultation and liaison between interest groups, rural communities and local planning authorities.

THE EFFECTS OF FARMING ON OTHER RURAL LAND USES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

R5 Concern about pollution from modern farming practices

There are concerns that some modern farming practices, such as the spreading of slurry, use of fertilisers and the spraying of pesticides, are causing pollution in the estuary and its tributaries. In particular there is concern over pesticide levels within the estuary. Some persistent trace organic chemicals derived from pesticides have occasionally been found at concentrations which require further investigation. Also as new pesticides are being used it is necessary to revise monitoring and develop techniques to detect them. Much of the contamination arises from sources outside of the plan area from upstream runoff to rivers.

Who is involved: English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Countryside Commission, Environment Agency, ADAS, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service, local authorities, National Farmers Union, Health and Safety Executive and MAFF.

What is happening: MAFF and the Health and Safety Executive have developed codes of practice about slurry and pesticides and these are promoted by ADAS and the Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service. The Environment Agency advises farmers on good practice and prosecutes polluters. The Agency will continue with its national research programme into the sources and control of pesticides in the aquatic environment. English Nature and Countryside Council for Wales work with landowners and occupiers on the Gwent and Somerset Levels and other Sites of Special Scientific

Interest. MAFF encourages a return to more traditional agricultural practices using Environmentally Sensitive Areas and other appropriate grant schemes.

Some suggestions: Further publicise codes of practice and pollution prevention measures. Environment Agency pesticide monitoring programmes within the estuary are to be assessed and revised following analysis of the data collected so far.

R6 Effects of intensive farming on wildlife

Intensive agricultural production is often seen as being incompatible with the conservation of wildlife habitats. During the last 40-50 years the estuary floodplain, traditionally managed as lowland grazing marsh, has seen change through under-draining, ploughing and reseeded, together with the increasing use of artificial fertilisers. Large areas have been converted to arable production and high yield grasslands for intensive dairy farming or grazing by sheep.

Who is involved: MAFF, Welsh Office Agriculture Department, Internal drainage boards, Agricultural Development Advisory Service, English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Countryside Commission, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, Forest Authority, landowners and occupiers.

What is happening: The conservation agencies and the Government agricultural departments are working with landowners to encourage the sympathetic management of wildlife habitats using the present financial incentives and schemes. Water Level Management Plans are being used in places to balance the needs of land drainage with wildlife and conservation.

Some suggestions: Consideration could be given to ways in which the current initiatives/ schemes can be extended, for example: Environmentally Sensitive Areas, Farm Stewardship Scheme, Habitats Scheme and Tir Cymen, as well as pushing for changes to the Common Agricultural Policy funding.

R7 Management of agricultural grazing of saltmarsh

The estuary supports many small areas of saltmarsh which are grazed by livestock. They form an important part of the estuary's nature conservation value and also contribute to coastal defence. Grazing is important in maintaining their conservation value, but too much grazing can cause damage and lead to increased erosion.

Who is involved: English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, ADAS, Welsh Countryside and Agricultural Information Service, MAFF, Welsh Office, farmers and landowners.

What is happening: The conservation agencies and the Government agricultural departments are working with landowners to encourage the sympathetic management of these saltmarsh areas using the present financial initiatives and schemes.

Some suggestions: Investigate how appropriate management can be achieved as well as considering the role of initiatives to encourage farmers to maintain the appropriate grazing regimes with financial incentives.

R8 Concern about flooding of villages and farmland

See issues C1 - C3 in chapter 5.