

ANALYSIS

The clock is ticking on the Agri-Environment Schemes Review. With barely two months until the consultation ends, it is time to consider the importance of local priorities for landscape and make them count, explains *Paul Mahony*

IN RECENT DECADES, the English countryside has undergone a series of dramatic changes, many of which are now widely seen as having been detrimental and deleterious. Much of the damage remains unquantified — for instance, the impact on local distinctiveness — though financial estimates of the environmental damage caused by agriculture alone range from £1b to £1.5b per annum; and despite the conservation of certain areas, such as nature reserves, it is generally accepted that there remains some degradation of the wider landscape.

The increasing recognition of the need for multi-functional landscapes serving sustainable agriculture, rural economies, wildlife conservation, access to health and lifelong learning, has prompted a reappraisal of rural land management.¹ Nationwide public and professional concern has been mirrored by the Government's decision to review a range of instruments — such as land-use planning, regulation and economic incentive schemes — in order to establish a better rural environment for the future.

Given that agriculture remains the primary means of managing 76 per cent of the English countryside, it is no wonder that agri-environment schemes are a key contributor to the Government's overall objectives.² Not only do they complement regulatory mechanisms, but in addition, they have proved to be an effective means of encouraging farmers to maintain valued areas of the countryside. In essence, agri-environment schemes offer payments to reward land managers for environmentally sustainable farming practices. Entry into such schemes is voluntary, with the aim being to assist farmers in maintaining, protecting and enhancing the rural environment; thereby underpinning tourism and leisure, as well as contributing to landscape character, quality of life, biodiversity, rural employment and farm vitality.

A proposed new structure of agri-environment schemes is currently being developed with the aim of producing a simpler, more streamlined package that will enable schemes to contribute effectively to solving environmental problems.³ The new schemes are designed to be flexible in responding to local situations, with an emphasis on delivering outcomes, rather than adherence to a rigid set of prescriptions.

The Agri-Environment Schemes Review began in January 2002 and it is intended that the new and revised schemes will be rolled out early in 2005. These will comprise:

- an Entry Level scheme, available to all farmers across the country and aimed at delivering simple environmental management;
- a Higher Tier scheme, which will bring together the best elements of the current Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) and the Countryside Stewardship Schemes (CSS). Landscape features as a key objective in both new schemes. The Entry Level scheme will aim to protect diffuse pollution, loss of biodiversity, loss of landscape character and damage to the historic environment. The Higher Tier scheme will have five main objectives — wildlife conservation, protection of the historic environment, maintenance and enhancement of landscape character and quality, improving public access and resource protection — coupled with two secondary objectives of flood management and genetic conservation.

The importance of landscape issues in agri-environment schemes is evident. While it has always been a central objective of current ESAs and CSS, the question has always been how to effectively identify, measure and communicate targets in landscape terms. From the beginning in ESAs, landscape assessments were used to provide the baseline statement for the monitoring and management of the scheme. In CSS, since publication of the joint Character Map

REFERENCES:

1. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Rural White Paper, *Our Countryside: the future — a fair deal for rural England*, <www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralwp/whitepaper/default.htm>, 2000.
2. Countryside Agency, *The state of the countryside 2003*, Countryside Agency Publications, p89, 2003.
3. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Conservation Management Division (DMD) is the team working on these new structures, with technical input from the Rural Development Service and consultation with external stakeholders.

of England in the mid-90s, landscape features and key characteristics from the Countryside Character Area descriptions have been included in the county targeting statements. While Character Area descriptions are helpful, they are a broad framework and their value is limited if there is no access to finer-grained information. This is where Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) can play a vital role, as it is LCAs that give this fine-grained detail which allows local priorities and targets to be made that will ultimately enable the new schemes to deliver locally appropriate landscape benefits.

The Agri-Environment Review offers a wealth of opportunities for the maintenance and enhancement of landscape character and quality; however, there remains a need for some consolidation of practice within landscape-based disciplines. Issues such as determining the appropriate spatial scale for LCAs; integrating land management plans with community strategies; balancing technical expertise with public involvement and much more besides, will remain open to lively discussion long after the consultation phase ends.

"The importance of maintaining and enhancing landscape character has been accepted; what we need to do now is make it happen," says Kaley Hart of the Countryside Agency. "We therefore need to make sure:

- that LCAs do feed back into the targeting decisions for the new agri-environment schemes;
- that we have an up-to-date list of where LCAs have been carried out;
- that land managers are made aware of landscape issues within their area;
- that clear and relevant guidance on how this relates to their management decisions is provided;
- and that appropriate training and guidance on

landscape issues is given to farm advisors. To this end, the Countryside Agency is currently exploring the feasibility of establishing a training programme on landscape for individuals involved in providing advice to farmers."

"It's a great start!" enthuses Merrick Denton-Thompson of Hampshire County Council, an advisor to the Government on the integration of environmental policy into farming practice. "The Entry Level scheme target of reaching 70 per cent of farmland marks a fundamental shift; it says that society is beginning to support the principle that every piece of land ought to be managed sustainably. That said, with regard to the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the Government has yet to sort out how the Single Farm Payment (involving the decoupling of subsidy from production) is going to relate to the new schemes. In short, we all need to ask the question, how sustainable is the £2b investment we make into British agriculture going to be if the public benefits — such as local distinctiveness, quality and sense of place — remain unquantified?"

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For more information visit the agri-environment pages on the DEFRA website:

w: <www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/reviews/agrienv/default.htm>.

The proceedings of the recent Countryside Character Network (CCN) workshop on LCA and agri-environment schemes can be found on the website:

w: <www.ccnetwork.org.uk>.

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