

Best Practice Information Sheet

Managing wetlands

Sheet 43.0a

Wetlands for grazing

Why change?

Wetlands contain plant species adapted to waterlogged conditions. The natural supply of water ensures that these plants continue to grow even during dry summer periods, providing valuable grazing when forage may be of limited supply on better quality agricultural land. Grazing wetlands has a range of benefits, which include:

- good source of dry weather grazing
- pollution control
- reduced risk of runoff and flooding
- conservation of rare habitat and species
- increased diversification opportunities.



Wetlands often provide additional summer grazing

Steps to success

- 1. Review the current situation by** identifying wetlands suitable for grazing on your farm. They need to be in areas where livestock are not likely to injure themselves and there are soils that can physically support them, i.e. deep peat soils might not be suitable. Identify the type of wetland and whether the site is designated or under agreement and if grazing is appropriate management of this wetland habitat.
- 2. Check Cross Compliance Regulations** in relation to overgrazing and unsuitable supplementary feeding on natural or semi-natural vegetation (GAEC 9) and vehicular movement on waterlogged land (GAEC 3).
- 3. Identify the potential opportunities** by mapping your wetlands so that they can be suitably managed. Grazing can provide a wide range of benefits but it is necessary to evaluate the techniques and costs necessary to support this form of wetland management. Investigate funding available for wetland grazing supplement and other wetland options under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and other agri-environment schemes.
- 4. Calculate the cost-benefit of these opportunities** by considering the benefits of grazing wetlands, especially in summer months when grass growth on better-drained land is restricted by droughtiness. Wetland grazing can save on the use of feed, and reduce the need for drain maintenance, which might not be cost effective on land difficult to drain effectively for alternative use. Your wetland may also act as a buffer strip, bringing other benefits such as improved fisheries and more interesting wildlife habitats, and help to increase the opportunities for diversification. At the same time you will be helping to protect and conserve wetlands, which are an important and diminishing natural resource.
- 5. Develop an action plan** for wetland grazing:
 - determine the breed of animal most suited to grazing the wetlands on your farm. Cattle and ponies are usually best suited in terms of their grazing and trampling behaviour. Sheep and pigs should be avoided
 - determine a reasonable stocking rate and avoid overgrazing. The numbers of grazers vary substantially depending on the species and size of grazing animal, the vegetation they are to eat, the plants that it is desirable to establish or maintain, and the climate and fertility of the site
 - adopt traditional management for wet pastures. Many ecosystems have developed historically under a moderate level of grazing. This may involve low stocking rates all year round, or seasonal grazing during summer months
 - ensure access and fencing is adequate for stock management
 - assess the cost of stock-proofing your wetland.
- 6. Check** your wetland regularly for injurious weeds (e.g. ragwort) and signs of overgrazing or poaching.

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Wetlands for grazing - Practical examples

Grazing ponies on wet grassland

Technique – An area of heath and wet acid grassland is lightly grazed year-round by Exmoor ponies.

Costs – negligible. The area requires minimal maintenance with no fertiliser application, draining or cutting costs.

Benefits – a wetland buffer zone which is also a rare habitat is maintained using grazing management with minimal effort.

In addition, it aids the preservation of the Exmoor pony which is an endangered species. Exmoor ponies are well suited to this type of habitat and for conservation grazing itself.

Grazing beef cattle

Technique – A traditional local breed of Devon Red beef cattle graze wetland areas during the summer months.

Costs – negligible. The area requires minimal maintenance with no fertiliser application, draining or cutting costs.

Benefits – productive summer grazing is provided with minimal effort.

A rare habitat (Culm Grassland) is maintained by the light grazing, and the local breed of cattle best suited to this type of habitat is conserved.



Moorland grazing



Beef cattle grazing rare Culm Grassland

Remember

- Wetlands can provide a useful source of summer grazing.
- Care must be taken to avoid overgrazing or poaching. Livestock suitable for grazing wetlands should be carefully selected, avoiding sheep and pigs.
- Payments are available under an Environmental Stewardship Scheme for the genetic conservation of traditional breeds. Payments are also available for wetland

For further information: Defra (www.defra.gov.uk), Environment Agency (www.environment-agency.gov.uk), ECSFDI (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/water/csf/delivery-initiative.htm>), Natural England (www.naturalengland.org.uk), Cross Compliance Helpline 0845 345 1302 (www.crosscompliance.org.uk) and ART (www.associationofrivertrusts.org.uk)



This information sheet is part of a series providing farmers with advice on land management practices to protect water bodies, produced by Association of Rivers Trusts with support from the England Catchment Sensitive Farming Delivery Initiative. The advice will also enable farmers to use farm resources more efficiently and help meet Nitrate Vulnerable Zone and Soil Protection Review requirements under Cross Compliance and environmental regulation.



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