

Best Practice Information Sheet

Managing wetlands

Sheet 44.0a

Wetlands for conservation

Why change?

The plants and animals found in wetlands are specially adapted to living in waterlogged conditions, and are extremely sensitive to changes, including reclamation and drainage. Wetlands can be easily and rapidly destroyed but, in many cases, may be impossible to replace. The remaining areas are of increased value and can:

- enhance the wildlife and landscape interest of your farm
- support diversification enterprises including tourism and fishing
- promote biodiversity.



Wetlands are vital for conservation

Steps to success

- 1. Review the current situation** by identifying the location and types of wetland on your farm. Larger areas of wetland may have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). However, smaller patches of wetland such as floodplain back lands and footslope seepage zones can also make a useful contribution to the survival of specialised species and the visual character of the landscape.
- 2. Identify potential opportunities** for wildlife conservation by assessing the condition of existing wetland habitats. Many wetlands have been adversely affected by drainage, pollution and overgrazing, which all pose a significant threat to wetland habitats and restoration or rehabilitation might be necessary.

Areas of previously drained or degraded wetland might be suitable for restoration. Simple changes to drainage networks such as the blocking of drains or diversion of ditches, or reduction in fertiliser usage may be all that is required to restore some wetlands.

- 3. Calculate the cost-benefit of these opportunities** by considering the benefits of establishing wetland conservation areas. Conservation areas may enhance the potential for tourism and recreation based activities, while enhancing the biodiversity of the farm and the appearance of the landscape. In addition, wetland conservation areas may provide many of the benefits offered by wetland buffer zones. Funding is available for wetland creation and restoration through Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and other agri-environment schemes
- 4. Develop an action plan** for establishing wetland conservation areas:
 - assess the suitability of farmland areas for wetland conservation
 - determine the type of habitat desired and decide on the best management techniques to maintain it
 - assess the possibility of using wetland conservation areas for summer grazing. Light grazing of some habitats is essential for their maintenance, and can provide valuable grazing when forage supply may be limited on better-drained land, and where droughtiness can limit plant growth
 - investigate the availability of grants for establishing wetland conservation areas, such as Entry and Higher Level Stewardship (ELS/HLS)
- 5. Check** your conservation areas regularly for injurious weeds (e.g. ragwort) and signs of degradation from excessive nutrient inputs, overgrazing and scrubbing-up.

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Wetlands for conservation - Practical examples

Conserving Culm Grassland

Type of habitat – an area of Culm Grassland that is a nutrient-poor, species-rich wetland habitat, which was formerly extensive in North Devon, but is now much reduced.

Conservation benefits – Culm Grassland supports many rare species, but of particular interest is the endangered Marsh Fritillary butterfly and characteristic plants such as the meadow thistle.

Management – the wetland is designated as a SSSI and its management is funded under an agri-environment agreement. Management includes light summer grazing by cattle and occasional swaling (burning) in early spring



Culm grassland - rare and valuable wetland habitat

A floodplain wetland

Type of habitat – this is an area of wetland developed on wet soils towards the back of the floodplain.

Conservation benefits – a large variety of plant and animal species are supported. Additionally, a wide variety of wildfowl feed and roost in the wetland, and consequently additional farm income is generated through shooting.

Management – the wetland is self-maintaining, with the highly productive vegetation producing a thick litter layer that prevents scrubbing-up. Wild deer carry out natural grazing.



Floodplains provide natural areas of wetland

Remember

- Conservation areas improve the biodiversity of your farm and help maintain the landscape.
- Wildlife areas can provide homes for many species that can provide natural pest control on the farm.
- Some wetland habitats require careful management, while others are self-maintaining.
- Funding for wetland creation, restoration, maintenance and management is available under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and other agri-environment schemes

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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