



## Should stewardship be a sentence?

**If you're one of the 3500-odd farmers who've applied for Countryside Stewardship (CS) and are still waiting for your agreement, I share your anguish. But frankly I fear the Government is doing all it can to dismantle the scheme.**

I'm actually one of the handful of growers in possession of that rarest of things — a CS agreement with Natural England (NE). But before you curse me, and hiss "what anguish?", let me tell you, I fought long and hard for this contract although now I'm seriously wondering whether it's a prison cell that's slowly entombing me.

Regular readers of Talking Tilth may recall I had a run-in with the Environment Agency (EA) last year — an inspection that resulted in a pollution problem being identified. You'll be relieved to hear it's all been resolved amicably. The EA chap and I agreed it would be a good idea to use my existing CS agreement to bolster my water protection buffers — that is the whole point of various measures of the scheme after all.

NE, however, thought differently — I've just received notification my amendment request has been refused. When I queried it, I was told by email that "no amendment will be accepted on mid-tier or higher-tier Countryside Stewardship that adds land or options into the agreement" — it's a "policy" decision that's come straight from top brass.

This latest tussle has followed months of wrangling with NE over a computer error that resulted in a mistake on my original agreement. I cannot tell you the pain and suffering it took to get on to the scheme in the first place. What's more, I've yet to be paid a penny of what I was promised. That sum itself is beginning to look derisory for the effort I've gone to and the costs I've incurred, and now I feel entrapped by the scheme I fought so hard to join.

But having been to the NFU conference recently, I'm beginning to feel like the patsy in all this. Andrea Leadsom and George Eustice were also there. Both of them, in between vomit-inducing bouts of farmer fawning, delivered presentations with the content of "naff all squared", according to one broadcast journalist. But they were both very vocal on one aspect — that the CAP is a regulatory nightmare and won't farming be wonderful once we're free of it?

And this comes back to the 3500 farmers in CS purgatory, as well as the many thousands

who may be planning to join them over the next two years. The Government clearly has no intention of honouring its commitment to a scheme bound by EU rules for which it has no support — it would surely be madness to bring farmers into five-year agreements it intends to dismantle in less than three.

As to what CS will be replaced with, it appears Defra is still clueless — no bare bones of a policy were announced, no whiff of a Green Paper and not even a date for its intended consultation.

Thankfully, however, the NFU has stepped into the vacuum left by a dithering Defra and seized the agenda. During a side briefing at the conference, NFU Brexit director Nick von Westenholz revealed a new three-pronged approach to a post-2020 farm policy. It's quite a cunning plan, and the fruits of the recent consultation the NFU undertook with its members.

The three prongs are productivity, volatility and environment measures. If things go badly in trade negotiations, more funding is directed at volatility measures, such as crop insurance and market support payments. But if markets are kind, payments are directed more towards capital grants, R&D and tax breaks designed to boost productivity. A core fund would be designed to deliver public goods, such as environmental benefits.

There's no detail at present, and the plan has yet to be presented to Defra ministers. It's also hoped that current

levels of funding will be retained, although if more is channelled towards productivity, less will be paid in direct subsidy.

So this is far from a solution to the appalling cluelessness and lack of leadership shown by Defra. But it's an indication that when right-minded farmers come together and act cohesively on the opportunities presented, great things can be accomplished.

## A spanner to join a hub

Adama's Septoria Hub, a web-based service that gives growers technical information on the disease, has just gone live. It contains background information, based on the technical guide Adama prepared with CPM last year. There are then webinars and weekly updates, with information on disease levels and timely advice, including access to a network of regional advisors.

Some may say it's just a tool for Adama to sell its product. But for those able to put their cynicism aside and sign up to the hub, the reward is quite a valuable free information pointer against a disease that's getting ever more tricky to outsmart, we reckon. And you get a free spray-can lid spanner — no brainer.

<http://uk.campaigns.adama.com/septoria-hub-sign-up>

Tom Allen-Stevens has a 170ha arable farm in Oxon, and three years and 10 months of the CS sentence left to serve.

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