

Rural Land Management

FORCES FOR CHANGE

Viability of farming

- Farm economy - the agricultural economy generally has experienced a pronounced period of uncertainty due largely to the strong pound and increasingly competitive international markets. There has been an ongoing recession since the mid-1990s, with severe pressure on farm incomes. This restricts the finance that is available to support conservation. Even greater dependence upon income from non-farming activities seems inevitable in future. Initiatives, such as, local produce marketing to link product to place, are required to retain more expenditure within the local economy.
- Under the CAP Reform package, the Single Payment Scheme replaces eleven schemes with one new single payment. Farmers will have greater freedom to farm to the demands of the market as subsidies will be decoupled from production, and environmentally friendly farming practices will be better acknowledged and rewarded.¹
- Succession - the farming industry is currently facing a recruitment and succession crisis as the majority of farmers approach retirement age. Attracting the next generation of farmers and rural land managers in the Cotswolds may be a particular problem given continuing pressures on farm incomes, availability and costs of housing, and uncertain prospects for both cereals and livestock.
- Fragmentation - contrasting with the decline in workers is an increase in the number of holdings by 1.7% (2,305 compared with 2,267 in 1983). This is largely the result of fragmentation of holdings and an increase in parttime and hobby farming (56.4% of the total by number, (an increase of 9%). It can lead to inappropriate development and management practices.
- Reversion/change - farmhouses are now often being sold off with small parcels of land. This can lead to an increase in land not being farmed; this then starts to revert to its natural state or leads to extensive 'gardens'. There may be opportunities to influence such development to ensure that it respects local landscape character within the Cotswolds.
- Diversification - many farmers and landowners in the Cotswolds are essentially dependent upon diversification options in order to sustain the economics of their farming businesses. The popularity of the area with tourists presents real opportunities, and there is scope to develop local quality products in view of the area's affluence. Some options can challenge people's ideas of what is right for an area, others can incrementally lead to significant changes in the appearance of an area over

¹ An analysis of threats and opportunities of the CAP reforms was undertaken as part of the "Cotswold Farming Study" – Cotswolds AONB Partnership (2003)

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2008-13

Additional Information

time. Diversification has become a bigger issue since 2004 as more farmers and landowners seek opportunities to supplement farm income.

- Pressures of climate change (mitigation and adaptation) and especially the emergence of bio-energy as an alternative to growing food.

Managing change whilst sustaining landscape character

Changes in farming patterns linked to changes in the economics of particular crops or farming practices can potentially lead to changes in the landscape character of an area:

- Decreases in the numbers of livestock are having a detrimental impact in some areas. A decline in grazing on commons and other permanent grassland results in the development of rank grasses and the invasion of scrub, producing an adverse landscape and biodiversity impact. There is concern that new agricultural support mechanisms introduced following reform of the Common Agricultural Policy are tending to reduce the numbers of stock available for grazing.
- Reversion to grass from arable where appropriate is hampered by difficulties in re-stocking and a shortage of skills. Stocking has become more expensive and rarer breeds, more suited to harsher grassland sites, are in short supply.
- Loss of stone walls and hedgerows, often replaced by wire fences, has resulted from the creation of large fields. Walls have been lost in large numbers. Hedges have also been left unmanaged, since they are no longer used to contain stock. The costs of repair to walls have become prohibitive for many farmers, even when substantial grants are available. Subdivision by post and rail fencing has an adverse landscape impact.
- There have been changes in the agricultural crops grown, including the widespread use of oilseed rape and an increase in maize grown for forage.
- Biofuels, such as short rotation coppice. Miscanthus and straw could become important crops over the next few years. Similarly there are opportunities to produce ethanol from cereals. There may be better opportunities for growing and utilising these products once satisfactory processing plants and markets have received approval and been developed.
- More mechanisation, improved efficiency and pressures to reduce costs have led to contract farming and a declining local workforce. The landscape within the AONB can suffer by damage to archaeological remains through adoption of more intensive methods and use of larger machinery. Efficiency measures can also lead to redundant buildings and damage to and/or neglect of wildlife habitats.

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2008-13

Additional Information

- The decline in workforce numbers can mean that there is insufficient labour or skills available on the farm to carry out much of the work necessary to maintain the landscape and associated habitats.
- Local food Campaigns such as “Taste of the West”² and “Buy Local”³ and farmers markets⁴ encourage consumers to purchase locally sourced food. This helps forge closer links between producers and customers. It increases understanding of the countryside, how food is produced and the customer has a better knowledge of where the food comes from.

Woodland management

Many woodlands are not managed at all or are under managed. This is due to many factors but especially to the loss of appropriate markets for woodland products. High-grade timber, both softwood and hardwood, has a ready market. However, markets for low-grade hardwoods have deteriorated over a long period of time as traditional wood-using trades have declined and competition from cheap imports has increased. New or developing markets for low-grade timber, such as wood fuel, are essential for the viable management of many broadleaved woodlands. This applies particularly to smaller woods where access is difficult and the return from high forest timber alone is marginal.

For much of the past 50 years there has been a decline in controlled felling and regular replanting to maintain a varied age structure, particularly in smaller woodlands and those of smaller holdings. This has resulted in a long-term deterioration in the commercial value of the timber and a decline in some aspects of the visual and environmental quality of woodlands. The problem is compounded by the fact that many woodlands in the AONB are dominated by beech, particularly along the escarpment, which rapidly deteriorates in value upon reaching maturity. In most cases restoration of neglected woodland and new woodland planting is not economically viable without government support.

The economic situation is made worse by the fact that smaller sawmills are closing because of a lack of facilities and plant for adding value to their products.⁵ Consequently, untreated timber has to be transported over greater distances, which adds to traffic and also to the mill gate price. Financial decisions are also influenced by the fact that amenity woodland is not considered to be valid business expenditure and therefore no tax relief is available for related expenditure. Shooting as a sport can be a source of additional revenue. Indeed this is a prime reason for active management of woodland given the difficult market conditions for timber and other woodland products.

² <http://www.tasteofthewest.co.uk/>

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/focus/foodanddrink/2003/05/buy_local/buy_local.shtml

⁴ <http://www.farmersmarkets.net/>

⁵ SW England Woodland and Forestry Strategic Economic Study 2002

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2008-13

Additional Information

Charcoal burning and 'bodging' are undertaken in the area although currently only on a very small scale, as markets are limited. Recreational uses of woodland could raise income, but care needs to be taken to minimise the impact of noise and disturbance and prevent inappropriate development and effects on biodiversity within the AONB.

The landscape impact of woodland planting and management

Much recent shelter-belt planting and small woodland planting does not take proper account of its landscape setting and in particular its effects upon traditional open views across the Cotswolds. Additional woodland planting in the AONB should only be permitted providing the location, scale and design is appropriate to the landscape character. It should also meet Forestry Commission guidance to ensure good silvicultural and environmental practice. New planting can help to redress the loss of trees in the wider countryside and can contribute greatly to the quality of the landscape. Care must be taken in the location of new planting to protect sites of historic, ecological and archaeological importance.

The appropriate balance of new planting against restoration of existing woodland needs to be determined. Currently the scale of restoration is extremely limited. Ideally much more emphasis should be given to the restoration of existing ancient woodland rather than creating additional woodland. New planting should be carefully assessed in advance from a landscape, ecological, and historic environment perspective to ensure that it offers distinct benefits from a landscape, biodiversity or recreational perspective, such as through linking existing ancient and semi-natural woodland.

Tree planting can be considered for non-commercial functions, for example the planting of small areas for aesthetic reasons to enhance the landscape, or as a management tool for screening or as shelterbelts. It also has value as an after use for restored mineral workings and derelict land. New wood pasture should perhaps also be encouraged where it previously existed.

Coniferous woodland has a distinct economic value so it needs to be accepted that conifers are now a part of the Cotswold landscape and that planting and replanting of them will be a continuing activity. However, in areas of ancient woodland, replacement with broadleaved woodland is desirable in the interests of the landscape and biodiversity. Where replanting of conifers is acceptable it is important that it is done in a manner which respects the general rolling contours of the landscape, rather than cutting sharply across them.

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2008-13

Additional Information

The Board has issued guidelines for tree planting for each of the landscape character types identified in the AONB Landscape Character Assessment.⁶

Loss of hedgerow trees

Single trees and small groups of trees within hedgerows and fields, especially veteran trees, can make a particularly significant contribution to the appearance of some of the Landscape Character Types identified in the Cotswolds Landscape Character Assessment. Such trees and high hedges can also contribute to higher agricultural productivity through the microclimates they create.

Hedgerow trees need: appropriate protection from ploughing under the canopy; maintenance to minimise damage and loss; and an appropriate replacement programme to ensure mature hedgerow trees in the future. Their loss could be accentuated by the effects of climatic change, in particular more common high winds and waterlogged soils, which reduce root anchorage.

Bio fuels/wood fuels

Woods and forests have the potential to help directly implement renewable energy policies, by providing wood for fuel thus helping substitute for fossil fuels. Trees can be replaced or re-grow after being cut and woods and forests are beginning to play an important role in helping deliver renewable energy in the AONB especially through local heating. Installations are reliable, modern, easily controlled and efficient. Woodfuel technology is now well proven and is not the barrier to increasing use. Fuel sourced from existing woods should be seen as a complement to the growing of energy crops e.g. willow and Miscanthus, which can provide a new use for agricultural land where farmers and landowners can 'contract grow' for larger heat and power plants. The other environmental impacts (e.g. landscape and biodiversity) of larger scale Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) need to be carefully assessed.⁷ The transport of high volume wood products over long distances could negate their benefits in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The development of a locally based supply chain will be of benefit.

The Board has issued a position statement setting out criteria to be considered when assessing the impact of a proposed Miscanthus crop on the AONB.

⁶ <http://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/files/uploads/Woodland-text.pdf>

⁷ "South West Regional Woodland and Forestry Framework " Forestry Commission (SW) 2006

COTSWOLDS AONB MANAGEMENT PLAN 2008-13

Additional Information

The traditional firewood industry for open fires and woodburning stoves remains. However, this source of heat is usually a 'top up' to fossil fuel systems and does not impact significantly upon renewable energy targets. Nevertheless, firewood supply is a useful business opportunity and employed in rural areas and woodfuel systems geared to domestic use could become a substitute for fossil fuel heating.⁸

⁸ *ibid*