

Fact Sheet Seven

Farming in the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



A Cotswolds Farming Study was commissioned by the Cotswolds AONB Partnership and published in April 2004. It was produced by a research team from the Countryside and Community Research Unit of the University of Gloucestershire and GFA-RACE at the Royal Agricultural College. The findings included the following statistics:

- Agricultural land accounts for 83% of the total area of the AONB.
- 82.7% of the agricultural land in the AONB is Grade 3.¹
- 6.4% of the agricultural land in the AONB is Grade 4.
- The total area of land in agricultural use in 2002 was 168,388 hectares, compared with 170,995 hectares in 1990.
- Dairy cattle numbers have decreased markedly, from nearly 25,500 in 1990 to just below 15,700 in 2002.
- The total cattle numbers have declined to just over 70,650 - a fall of nearly 35,000 (approx 30%) since 1990.
- The number of beef cattle has fallen from 11,750 to nearly 10,100 (i.e. by just over 14%) over the same period. The Farming Study anticipates significantly reduced levels of production nationally over the next decade, with effects concentrated in more marginal areas.² Health threats such as BSE and TB have caused much uncertainty and risk.
- Sheep numbers have also decreased significantly by nearly 82,000 (over 24%). The Farming Study expects this to continue, which means that problems of grazing on important unimproved grassland sites will be accentuated and prospects for further arable reversion are weakened.
- The total labour force was 5,211 in 2002, compared with 5,350 in 1990. There has been a 2.6% reduction in the agricultural labour force since 1990.
- There were 3,020 farm holdings in the AONB in 2002, with an average size of 56 hectares. However, there is an increasing polarisation in size. In all, 45% of all farm holdings were fewer than five hectares in size, although at the other extreme 13% were more than 100 hectares. All sizes in between were well represented. There is an opportunity therefore to influence the actions of large landowners to enhance the AONB. Equally however, there is also a need to assist and guide the increasing number of people who are running relatively small holdings, many of whom are non-farmers.
- Crops and fallow is the dominant land use, accounting for 44% of agricultural land in 2002. Permanent grassland (31%), temporary grassland (7%) and rough grazing (3%) means grazing land of one form or another accounted for a further 41%.
- The principle crops in the AONB are Oilseed Rape, oats, wheat, barley, grass.
- Nearly 6% of agricultural land in the AONB is woodland. This is a very distinctive feature of the Cotswolds as it has two-thirds more woodland than the average for the South West region.
- Set aside has also been very significant. It increased by nearly four times from just over 2% in 1990 to nearly 8% in 2002. There was a sharp increase after 1995 but it is likely to decrease sharply as a result of the government target of 0% set aside in 2008.
- Both permanent grassland and woodland have increased slightly since 1990. For grassland this reverses a previous decline.

1. The ALC (Agricultural Land Classification) System is a land grading framework designed to give strategic guidance on land quality for planning purposes and is the responsibility of DEFRA (The Department for Environmental Food and Rural Affairs). It allows agricultural land to be graded from best (grade 1) to worst (grade 5) and provides a consistent, country-wide system of land classification. Assessment of agricultural land is based on the long-term, physical and chemical properties of the land and how they might restrict its use.

2. Cotswolds Farming Study - Based on research by Queen's University Belfast, Analysis of the Impact of Decoupling on Agriculture in the UK, Agricultural Policy and Food Chain Economics Division Defra, 2003.

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