

GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS FARM HEDGES



Outline: Control of farming matters by *Defra* since the 1970s was increasingly dictated from Brussels. The change in farming subsidies towards environmental schemes meant that some grant aid was available for some Cornish hedges. With Britain scheduled to leave the European Union, the future is uncertain.

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

The scenario, or more accurately running skirmishes, between the government and farmers changes all the time. Roughly, the *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)* is decided in Brussels, and its rules are applied to a greater or lesser extent by each member country. Since the war, British farmers have received different payments depending on where they farmed, what and how much they produced, and what they wanted to spend money on their farm. In the more recent CAP reorganisation of farm subsidies, these were resolved into the *Single Farm Payment* whereby each farmer gets an annual payment based partly on the money he had been receiving, and partly on the size of his farm. The farmer must keep all his land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). The GAEC rules are listed in the *Defra Cross-Compliance Handbook* (52 pages). Most of them affect the daily work of farmers, an example being the banning of hedge trimming (with few exceptions) during March to July. In 2006/7 ten more sets of compulsory regulations were brought in.

Voluntary environmental schemes.

The main voluntary scheme was *Environmental Stewardship* (which later included the *Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme* and the *Countryside Stewardship Scheme*). Its official aims were:- Conserve wildlife (biodiversity) - Maintain and enhance landscape quality and character - Protect the historic environment and natural resources - Promote public access and understanding of the countryside - Natural resource protection (including genetic conservation and flood management). It came in three sections: the *Entry Level Scheme (ELS)*, the *Organic Entry Level Scheme (OELS)* and the *Higher Level Scheme (HLS)*. The ELS looked at “some of the environmental issues affecting the wider countryside” and gave £30 per hectare annually for selected “land management options linked with specific environmental features”. The OELS was largely the same as the ELS but gave £60 per hectare for registered organic land, which is more expensive to farm. The HLS gave money for “more significant benefits in high priority situations and areas”. Agreements under the ELS and OELS were for 5 years and the HLS 10 years with a 5-year break clause. Broadly, the ELS was for maintaining what is already there; eg. the repair of gaps in Cornish hedges. No eligible farmer would be refused for the ELS. The HLS was for doing new or restoring targeted high priority environmental items; eg. the building of new Cornish hedges. Funds for the HLS were limited and only the better schemes accepted.

In the *West Penwith ESA*, about 260 farmers get £85 per hectare annually for carrying on traditional farming methods including keeping all their stock-proof hedges in good repair, a very expensive item these days. The fact that the field patterns between St Ives and St Just look now the same as they did 20 years ago is a tribute to the scheme.

Problems.

The problem of applying schemes and regulations across Britain is that they have to apply the same to every situation, eg for a 2 ha field on Bodmin moor and a 200 ha field in East Anglia. This results in enormous quantities of paperwork eg the ELS instructions and application form is 112 pages long. Furthermore the rules are constantly being changed by Defra in the light of experience.

Until supermarkets arrived, the food produced by farmers was sold through markets to wholesalers who supplied the small shops in every town. The markets acted for the farmer and usually there were enough wholesalers to prevent their getting together to fix the prices, which varied day by day according to supply and demand. Nowadays the buying power is in the hands of the few large supermarkets. Because competition is ferocious and food is cheaply imported from other countries, they pay the farmers as little as they can, calculating their prices based on the farmers getting all the Defra grants that they are entitled to. The smaller or less-efficient farmers have to sell to the supermarkets at a loss as there is nowhere else to sell except for a tiny number of farmers' markets and local shops. This means that many small family farms have had to close down because the prices they get are not enough to live on. (www.ukagriculture.com > farming today)

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