

UK seminar on High Nature Value farming policy

18th June 2012

Purpose of the seminar

The purpose of the seminar was to get an overview of recent case-studies that have been carried out in England, Wales and Scotland looking at aspects of HNV farming, and possible policy options. We wanted to disseminate the work that EFNCP and others have done in conjunction with the constituent members of LUPG, and look at how this might help us to focus on the importance of HNV farming and options for the next round of Rural Development Programmes.

In summary, the aim was to:

- present the policy background and review the state of play at EU and UK levels
- present examples of work in different parts of the UK
- discuss policy implications, in terms of identifying, supporting and monitoring HNV farmland

The target audience was national and local government/agencies, conservation NGOs, and policy consultants who have worked on HNV farming.

The concept of HNV farmland has been around for twenty years or so – since the early 1990s (that of HNV forestry for much less time, but the seminar didn't look at forestry aspects). However, in the UK context HNV farmland has not really established itself in the policy framework. Some of the UK countries have found it difficult to report on the HNV farmland indicator (which forms part of the Rural Development Plan (RDP) reporting process under the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF)) under the current Rural Development Regulation.

HNV farming has also been suggested as a criteria for targeting RDP and even Pillar 1 support, for example under the Less Favoured Areas and greening mechanisms, but such moves would require all Member States to accurately identify HNV farming or farmland using common or at least equivalent criteria. See guidance on HNV farming indicators: http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation/evaluation-methodologies/guidance-on-specific-indicators/high-nature-value/en/high-nature-value_en.cfm

But HNV farming is much more than just a technical indicator of how much of our farmland is rich in biodiversity and how the character of this resource is changing over time. The features of this type of farming, such as semi-natural grassland and woodland, hedges and ponds and often small field patterns in lowland England, or the crofting system and extensive pastures in north-west Scotland, have landscape and cultural values as well as supporting traditional breeds of farm animals and varieties of crops which contribute to agricultural biodiversity.

EFNCP have highlighted that: "Biodiversity goals cannot be met solely by protecting particular habitats, species or areas, such as under Natura 2000. We must also maintain the low-intensity land-uses that favour the dynamics of natural processes and create opportunities for many of our most valued habitats and species to flourish across large, contiguous areas of land. This approach is important to allow wildlife to adapt to climate change."

The recent report on data from the Pan-European Common Bird Monitoring Scheme shows that farmland birds populations across Europe are continuing to fall. Farmland birds are accepted as an indicator of biodiversity quality as a whole – so there has to be concern that biodiversity in the farmed environment is still threatened and that the ability to meet the EU 2020 target (no loss of biodiversity) could be compromised. Data on farmland butterflies also shows negative trends, although the monitoring across Europe has a patchy coverage.

We need not only to identify HNV farmland and find ways of monitoring change (partly to meet the RDP monitoring requirement) but also to understand the mechanisms that will ensure its continued survival. In turn this points to the need to consider whether a more focussed package of measures will be necessary under the next round of RDPs to support HNV farmland from the risks of either intensification or abandonment.

Are the existing agri-environment measures going to be adequate for the task – provided we can successfully identify the extent of our HNV farmland and target the tools we already have to hand? These areas have so far avoided agricultural intensification (often because they are inherently less agriculturally productive due to poorer soils, topography etc.) but as Pillar 1 of the CAP and the socio-economic context continue to evolve, there will be pressures for intensification of land with production potential, and for abandonment of the land with least potential. This poorer land is not all found within the LFA.

Most countries find that Type 1 HNV farmland (dominated by semi-natural vegetation) can be relatively straightforward to identify, as is Type 3 HNV (more intensive farmland that nevertheless supports certain species of conservation concern). The sticking point at present seems to be the identification of the HNV Type 2 farmland (the matrix of small fields, patches of semi natural grassland and woodland, improved grassland, less intensively managed crops, hedges and ponds). Exactly what does this include, where is it and how much of it is out there? And how can it be supported and monitored?

The seminar looked at two overall questions:

- how to monitor trends in HNV farmland/farming against a baseline situation (as required by the CMEF indicator since 2006).
- how to target policy at HNV farmland/farming (not an explicit EU requirement, although maintaining HNV farming is a Pillar 2 priority)

The first step in answering both these questions is to define and identify HNV farmland/farming at country level, but the tools for putting into practice a policy response are not necessarily the same in the two cases, although there may be overlaps.

Summary of seminar discussion

The following is a note of the key conclusions and points raised during the seminar discussions.

The EU level situation

Under the current RDPs, significant work and progress has been made in many countries in the identification and development of HNV farming indicators. The approaches vary. In most cases, land-cover data (e.g. CORINE, sometimes enriched with national data) is the main tool used to identify HNVF, although some countries have used farming systems data.

But in their reporting to the EC, HNV is the least well addressed of all the CMEF indicators. Many Member States simply report the extent of land within schemes such as agri-environment. Also, most Mid-Term Evaluation reports do not include analysis of Farmland Birds Index data. Thus the only two CAP biodiversity indicators are poorly addressed at present.

At EU level, the proposed new EAFRD regulation for post 2013 retains HNV farming as an environmental priority, and retains HNV farmland (or farming) as an indicator. Member States will continue to be required to report on their HNV farmland indicator. One particular improvement is the proposal to extend the monitoring framework to cover Pillar 1, so that HNV is an indicator for Pillars 1 and 2, which is important to ensure HNV farming systems are appropriately targeted.

For the next programming period, the Commission proposes accepting different methods for implementing the HNV farming indicator, within the common concept. This flexibility is welcomed.

During the discussions some of the limitations that remain in terms of identification and data were considered. The minimum option that will be accepted by the Commission as an HNV indicator is the up-dated EEA figure or the UAA in Natura 2000. Concern was expressed in the seminar that this minimum requirement, if adopted by a Member States, will contribute very little. There is no “value added” in simply reporting the extent of farmland in Natura 2000, while the EEA maps are based largely on CORINE+protected areas and are too crude for either targeting HNV farmland or for monitoring changes in this farmland. Another point raised during the discussions is that the term used is still “UAA” – this is a concern as large areas of HNV farmland (e.g. common grazings) are excluded from UAA data in some Member States, although included in others.

The European Commission is looking at current data systems such as LPIS, LUCAS, FADN, FSS, to see how they can be improved from the point of view of indicators and monitoring needs. Discussions highlighted the scope/need to improve how data relevant to HNVF is capture under current information systems. [Mapping ecosystem services is required from all Member States by 2014 under the EU Biodiversity Strategy – this should include semi-natural farmland and there is a clear overlap with HNV farmland mapping and monitoring.]

Finally it was noted that under the proposed new Rural Development Regulation there is no explicit requirement to target support at HNV farmland through RDPs. HNV farmland is identified as a priority, but it is up to Member States to assess national and regional priorities within the EU framework - some form of accountability or guidance may help ensure HNVF farmland priorities are addressed under the next programming period.

UK level

Five case studies and projects covering different parts of the UK were presented, informing discussions on a number of topics.

Monitoring

- A combined approach using land cover, species data and farming systems data, or combining some of these, would seem to be the best way forward to capture and monitor HNVF. However

keeping indicators relatively simple and separate can help make these more workable/practicable.

- Capturing semi-natural farmland through land cover data is the first step. The Carmarthenshire case study showed that this can be done with sufficient accuracy using remote sensing (Habitat Inventory Wales). This approach has also been used in Scotland. It could be tested across the whole of the UK (e.g. using UK Land Cover 2007).
- Species data generally is not useful on its own for identifying HNV farmland, and does not generate robust maps. This was confirmed by the case studies in all countries. However, species *monitoring* is potentially useful as a means of tracking trends in the condition of HNV farmland. If we could monitor semi-natural farmland plus a farmland index for birds, butterflies (bumblebees?) and flora, this would provide a good indication of trends in condition
- Farming systems data is also potentially useful for monitoring farming tendencies (changes in broad farm types, and in specific farm practices). The Scottish Government has successfully used this approach to identify HNV farm types in Scotland. Land cover data (semi-natural habitats) confirmed the value of this approach in the Scottish context. The indicator shows a decline of HNV farming between 2007 and 2008 in Scotland.
- Could the Countryside Survey (CS) be utilised more, and adapted to make it more useful for HNV farmland monitoring? The potential use of Countryside Survey for HNVF purposes in Northern Ireland was considered – it was found that NICS provides robust monitoring of trends in key HNV farmland types. The declines in extent of several types of semi-natural farmland in NI are very clear, but agricultural policy does not learn from this data. The density of NICS sample sites compared with other parts of the UK was seen as a positive benefit. How many sample squares would be needed for a robust UK-wide HNV farmland CS monitoring scheme? German HNV farmland monitoring has 900 sample squares, very similar to CS in UK. Some of the limitations with Countryside Survey were considered, for example CS does not monitor causal links of environmental change (although this could be addressed to some extent through the sample survey approach) and the timeline may not fit with the RDP monitoring cycle (but this could be altered). In conclusion there was support for the idea of CS to be contributing to the HNV objective in some way, which would probably be better than the CORINE+protected areas approach.

Policy targeting in the context of the RDP

- RDPs should support management of HNV land and aim to ensure economic sustainability of these farms. The HNV “area” for targeting should include all semi-natural farmland, not just prime (designated) sites.
- LPIS is an essential tool – there should be a way to register semi-natural farmland as a specific category on LPIS. This would make accurate targeting possible, as well as establishing the baseline for effective monitoring. A possible Pillar 1 payment for semi-natural farmland were discussed – this would encourage farmers to register such land on LPIS/IACS, which in turn would facilitate targeting and monitoring.
- Support is needed for the delivery of the HNV objective at the local level through partnership projects, and for outreach work to ensure that farmers with HNV farmland are encouraged into schemes.
- Should the focus be on lower grade land (Grades 4, 5 & 6)? Is it an opportunity to redefine LFA? The case studies showed there is a strong correlation between physical constraints and HNV. HNV farmland in the UK is almost entirely found on this lower grade land. But this does NOT

mean that all lower grade land is HNV farmland, as in some cases it has been improved and intensified (and vice versa, see next section). This confirmed the need to ensure LFA measures support the continuation of HNVF systems.

- An indicator or surrogate might be farming practice – such as late cutting for silage / haylage (one of the practices identified under the Scottish case study). Basic measures could be used to support the use of native livestock breeds or certain low intensity management crops associated with HNVF systems.

Farming Systems Approach

- Some HNV farming includes a mix of semi-natural land with more intensively used land, including crops, although overall intensity will be lower than in “mainstream” intensive farming. We need to recognise the value of the landscape scale mosaic, within which farms can include HNV and non-HNV farmland
- Farm systems data can allow the identification of broad HNV farm types, e.g. using figures on the amount of permanent pasture and stocking densities. The Scottish Government methodology using farm system data and land cover has provided a useful system that works in the Scottish context
- NE work in England found that Farm survey data did not allow for a robust categorisation of HNV farming types. But the survey could be improved to include relevant data for HNVF farming systems. The case studies showed there can be difficulties with interpretation of data at an individual farm level e.g. stocking densities, cattle breeds (e.g. traditional).
- Caution should be applied when making assumptions about farming types. For example, some Member States have made the assumption that organic farms are automatically HNV, but the Scottish case study confirmed that organic farms can be quite intensive and are not necessarily HNV.
- In conclusion HNV farm types can be useful as a monitoring tool. It was questioned whether HNV farm types can be distinguished with current data with sufficient accuracy to establish effective targeting of support at individual farm level, this is likely to be too crude. It was suggested that targeting of specific farming *practices* would be needed as well.

Changes on the ground that should be informing policy

- The England and Wales case studies showed that semi-natural farmland is being lost gradually to abandonment, afforestation and intensification. Agri-environment measures and NGO projects are helping to slow this process on the land they are targeting, but a large part of semi-natural farmland is not being targeted at present.
- There are big changes in Scotland – e.g. destocking in marginal areas. There is a need for information on these changes and their impact. The decline in activity levels and employment has a direct link to the environment. HNV monitoring should be designed so that it can provide data on such trends. Will the next round of the SRDP provide support for these areas?
- There is a continuing threat to permanent grassland in the UK from afforestation. Poorer land with low productivity and steep slopes is being targeted for woodland expansion. This is also happening elsewhere in the EU and HNV grasslands are vulnerable.

General discussion

- Timing – it was felt that unless the HNV concept could be made to work during the next RDP round it may be lost. It needs to be shown to work in practice. The HNV forestry objective has not been widely adopted and is now disappearing from the Regulation.
- Accurately identifying the distribution of semi-natural land cover on farmland would be an extremely valuable step - can the UK Land Cover 2007 map do this?
- What are the drivers behind change? If changes can be anticipated, support can be given to those who are delivering a range of public goods before these are lost.
- A sense of place is important. There is a separation between the technical side of mapping and monitoring and the people who manage the land. There needs to be more emphasis on managing land and to avoid taking a technocratic view. What farmers would nominate themselves as HNV managers?
- Farmers and crofters are not familiar with the HNV concept. However, it is understood in the outer Hebrides as a result of the Machair LIFE project where it is being used by farmers and is seen as positive. This demonstrates the effectiveness of education and promotion.
- Farmers are interested in maximising incentives. Many want compensation (e.g. for changing cattle breeds), and track funding. There is a danger of becoming locked into the supply side.
- Is there an assumption that money will be attached to the HNV concept? This is not proposed in EU policy, although supporting HNV farming is an EAFRD priority for the new period.
- There is a danger that the HNV objective is being looked at to fix problems caused elsewhere in the system. In other words, we don't just need an "HNV scheme" bolted onto existing policy, we need to review farming and environmental policies from top to bottom.

Conclusions and Next Steps

- HNV farming has been an indicator for 7 years – some parts of the UK have been slow to engage with it.
- Dialogue is essential, not just technical desk studies. Some EU countries have set up working groups (including Scotland) that have been effective in moving forward. Is there a need for some UK co-ordination and a role for LUPG in this?
- We also need to assess data systems, especially Countryside Survey and UK Land Cover Map, and IACS/LPIS – these are highly relevant tools. How to make best use of them in relation to current policies and priorities, and how to develop and adapt them for this purpose?
- We should consider possible changes to LPIS/IACS to register semi-natural grassland. This could be filled in by the farmer for each parcel. How could this be done easily? A simple unambiguous description would be needed. Under EIA implementation in the UK there are already systems for identifying semi-natural farmland. But something simpler is needed.
- Dialogue and discussion at a local level are also essential. Engage with farmers to investigate the nature of benefits – what funding would be available; what would make HNV practices attractive or viable?
- The HNV concept is about outcomes, it is not just a technical policy indicator. We need to know what is happening to farming and biodiversity on the ground and why, and to develop appropriate policy responses. Our farmland of most environmental value which is central to biodiversity strategy, RDP etc., is declining and we need to work harder to reverse this process. Once it has gone, it will not come back – restoration is expensive and not a substitute for keeping what is there already.