

Agri-Environments Schemes and the Value of Grass Marsh in Broadland
Report by Senior Ecologist

Summary: The report briefly outlines the history of the agri-environment support in the Broads as well as the development of the new agri-environment scheme, alongside the current increase in applications to Natural England to allow reversion back to arable and proposes a way forward.

Recommendation: That the Authority:

- (i) notes the legacy of public support for grass marshes and traditional grazing management in the Broads; and
- (ii) endorses the proposed plan of action in Section 4, including engagement and awareness raising with partners and landowners as set out in the report.

1 The Context

- 1.1 The Broads were the birth place of agri-environment schemes, when in 1985 the Broads Grazing Marsh Conservation Scheme was set up in response to public concern at the draining and ploughing up of Halvergate Marshes. For 28 years this landscape scale nature conservation has been secured, mainly under the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme (ESA) and continues to be supported by the Stewardship scheme.
- 1.2 The majority of ESA schemes in the UK have transferred into the Stewardship scheme. Stewardship is largely formed of the Higher or the Entry Level schemes, dependent on the biodiversity aspiration of the landowner and the existing habitats at the site. Both 2012 and 2013 are peak years for transfer, with around 440 expiries in Norfolk and 90 in Suffolk in 2013.
- 1.3 The future New Environment Land Management Scheme (NELMS), which will be the scheme to replace Stewardship, is currently being discussed and Defra will be consulting widely soon. Discussions include allocation of funding within the UK and greening measures, with general support for a targeted approach with a focus on gaining high value biodiversity and resource protection (e.g. soil and nutrient management) outcomes in the main.
- 1.4 The national parks are outlining the need for NELMS to take a whole ecosystems services approach and setting priorities around value for money (i.e. more public goods the greater the value at a simplistic level).

- 1.5 Grassland farmers and graziers are making business decisions based on certainty of agri-environment support, costs and returns from beef and dairy and also on the economies associated with remaining in the similar farming systems that suit the constraints of the land.
- 1.6 Should landowners wish to change land management of drained grasslands in their farm holding they will be required to undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) if the grass area is over two hectares and has not been cultivated in the last 15 years.

2 Recent Increase in Applications Received from Natural England for Screening Opinions On the Need for Environmental Impact Assessment for Ploughing of Marshes

- 2.1 To date, four screening opinions for EIA proposing ploughing of grass marshes in the Broads have been received. Natural England receives these applications and as a consultee the Broads Authority is invited to make comments in relation to screening opinions.
- 2.2 For projects which increase the productivity for agriculture of uncultivated land or semi-natural areas, the types of land covered by the EIA Regulations will either: not have been cultivated (physically or chemically) in the last 15 years as defined in the public guidance <http://tinyurl.com/q8cbuzy> and/or be a semi-natural area. Uncultivated land projects will be covered by the Regulations if the uncultivated land or semi-natural area directly affected by the project is two hectares or more in area.
- 2.3 One of these areas that have been subject to screening opinions for EIA has already been ploughed. This is in a particularly sensitive location in the Upper Thurne area. There is concern that despite the duty on the landowner to comply with Cross Compliance for rural payments and Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition, that an increase in saline and ochre polluted drainage may impact on the downstream designated site.

3 Issues

- 3.1 Agricultural intensification in the Broads area as a result of the change of land use from grazing marsh to arable has the potential to have adverse impacts on the Broads landscape and the key characteristics and elements that make the area unique in the UK. These impacts were well documented in Martin George's publication, 'The land Use, ecology and conservation of Broadland'. **Biodiversity and habitat impacts** of conversion to arable are likely to require reductions in water levels resulting in:
- Loss of priority habitat and associated rare species through drainage of nationally important water filled ditches
 - Nutrient enrichment and increasing salt levels of waterbodies, risking achievement of Water Framework Directive targets and loss of internationally important wildlife
 - Increased use of pesticide and potential impact on potable water supply

- Carbon loss through oxidation of deep peat soils
- Lower land levels and reduced flood water storage as increased land drainage and lower ditch levels are maintained for arable production

Landscape and cultural heritage impacts are likely to require reductions in water levels resulting in:

- Drained marshland is a relict industrial landscape and the setting for the drainage mills many of which are listed, thus the whole of the landscape is an archaeological feature in its own right
- Change in the setting for the built heritage of the Broads notably the drainage mills – the area of Halvergate having conservation area status based on its landscape value
- Changes from the pastoral quality of the landscape and those perceptual qualities that result from grazing livestock to one which is more transient and piecemeal
- Loss of diverse of visual qualities provided by wet ditches and wildlife rich marshes

4 Ways Forward

4.1 The New Environmental Land Management Scheme is likely to be more targeted as a result of a likely overall decline in funds. Given this challenging background, the Broads 'National Park' is an ideal location for partners to facilitate new rural policy initiatives, longer-term agreements and joint landowner schemes to deliver our shared ambition for ecosystems benefits and new water management regimes. Given national support, we believe that our well-developed Broadland partnerships can demonstrate these solutions within the wider farm business improvements. An action plan is set out below:

1. To engage with landowners, through discussions with the National Farmers Union and County Landowners Association with the shared vision of the Broads Plan to enhance business and ecosystem benefits as set out above.
2. To contribute towards a study to explore farmers' current and likely forward intentions of their business within a selection of the grass marshes in Broadland. This information will be collected via carefully designed surveys that will be subject to preliminary consultation with Natural England and NFU in order to understand the kinds of questions that would be helpful to have aid responses. This work will build on the NFUs document on Why Farming Matters in the Broads. It will also give further opportunity to talk to landowners about the connection of land and water in the Broads as part of the Catchment Approach. The study has already secured funding from the Broads Authority, Environment Agency and the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership. Further funding may be required.

3. To achieve greater awareness within partner organisations, including farming business, of ways to facilitate and support natural capital investment and payment for ecosystem services¹. Coordinate messages to Defra and the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership on the economic and public benefits of investing in Broadland initiatives.
4. To work closely with Water Management Alliance and Internal Drainage Broad (IDB) boards' to gain full recognition of role as competent authorities under the Habitats Regulations. The IDB is required to assess the effects of new drainage plans or projects under this legislation where European nature conservation sites may be affected.
5. Involve Water Management Alliance and IDB boards' and a number of stakeholders in the reappraisal of the Halvergate Conservation Area.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

- 5.1 Agri-environment schemes have changed and continue to evolve. It is important to consider the Broads Authority resource required to facilitate an area-based approach for land management in the Broads. Currently Broads Authority Officers engage in national working groups to shape new scheme development as well as providing land holding advice on Higher Level Stewardship applications, including ecology and water management across the Broads.
- 5.2 In the future facilitation could take several forms including; developing cooperative agreements (e.g. multiple landholdings) to support the landscape scale aspiration, continuing to provide specialist wetland management advice, agreeing the outcomes at a strategic and by holding basis and facilitating wider farm business improvements.
- 5.3 The new scheme is likely to have a more targeted approach and it is important to consider how the Broads Authority advises Defra and Natural England to target the new scheme for the Broads and link to other elements of the Rural Development Policy for England.

Background papers:	Martin George: The land Use, ecology and conservation of Broadland
Author:	Andrea Kelly
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Broads Plan Objectives:	CC4, LC2, BD1, BD2, BD3, BD4, BD5, AL1, AL2, AL3
Appendices:	None

¹ Ecosystem services are the goods and services from the environment. They include pollination, water purification, carbon storage and landscape