

Isle of Wight Catchment Sensitive Farming Spring 2020



Welcome

Whilst the Corona virus has and will continue to disrupt normal life for some time, many farmers this spring have been completing their application forms to join the Countryside Stewardship scheme. Perhaps this may, in part, be due to the forthcoming changes to the Basic Payment Scheme income which will shrink from 2021 through to 2027.

Stewardship offers real opportunities for the Island's Catchment Sensitive Farming work. Not only does it financially support a farm's environmental value it also improves the farm's economic performance. Efficient use of nutrients, improvements to soil condition and help with upgrades to infrastructure all contribute to supporting Island farmers.

For those who may be holding back from joining Stewardship as they wait for the new ELM scheme, our message is don't. It is clear that those part way through a Stewardship Agreement can switch into ELM without penalty. Of course, we do not yet know exactly what ELM will offer so Stewardship might be more advantageous for some.

Having endured almost continuous rain over the winter and watching soil wash down every slope and drain from gateways I was compelled to write about the benefits of cover crops. Read on below...



How easily will it be to forget last year's wet autumn and winter and its impact upon soil? From October through to February 738mm (29 inches) fell with 112 out of those 151 days recording rainfall. With fields constantly saturated the result was soil washing off farmland, roads turning to rivers and some crops unable to be harvested. Whilst rain in winter is not unusual the almost daily showers and storms meant little evaporation on those few dry days. Soils became permanently saturated with no capacity to soak up the next downpour. Any number of photos to illustrate the problem could have been used – below is one that is fairly typical where erosion is significant. Is this field getting close to a Cross Compliance failure?



Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition no.5 requires that...

To minimise soil erosion, you must take all reasonable steps to put suitable practical measures in place to prevent excessive soil and bankside erosion caused, for example, cropping practices and cropping structures etc.

You could lose some of your scheme payments if you have not taken all reasonable steps to prevent erosion over a single area of 1 or more hectares.

Any soil is potentially at risk of erosion but, on the Island, we have some that are particularly light and sandy with many on sloping ground. This is a problem for both the farm's long-term soil condition and rivers, streams and wetlands that can become clogged with silt. Water leaving the farm and carrying silt causes diffuse pollution. The run-off may also contain pesticides along with nitrate and phosphate. The fertilising effect of these inputs to wetlands can have a major impact upon wildlife as oxygen levels are depleted.

Bare soils are of course most vulnerable to winter rainfall and, whilst there are many ways to reduce damage, the use of cover crops is an obvious solution. Rainfall landing on a green cover gives good protection but that is not the only benefit:

Benefits of cover crops

- ✓ **Reducing the loss of nutrients**
- ✓ **Providing a green manure**
- ✓ **Adding fresh organic material**
- ✓ **Enhanced biological activity in the soil**
- ✓ **Improving soil structure**
- ✓ **Control of some weeds and pests**
- ✓ **Improving water quality**
- ✓ **Feeding opportunities for wildlife**

Cover crop mixtures can contain many different plants which provide different benefits. Vetches and legumes for example can fix nitrogen and so add fertility, whereas cereals such as oats, rye and rye grass give good early

cover with vigorous rooting to resist erosion. Sowing dates vary with the mix selected with opportunities throughout much of the year. Below is some sowing and growing advice from Cotswolds.

There is of course a cost when establishing a cover crop but the benefits above make it a wise investment. A winter cover crop containing a range of clovers, radish, phacelia, mustard with an annual ryegrass might cost around £50/ha whereas Fodder radish alone would be £45/ha. Grazing Rye (*Secale cereale*), which is most effective at reducing the loss of Nitrogen and is used for early spring grazing or cutting, would be £180/ha. For anyone contemplating a Countryside Stewardship application there is a very generous grant of £114/ha.

Is it not just plain common sense to ensure your most precious resource is not allowed to disappear off the farm!



Cover crops: sowing and growing

When to sow

Sow mixtures containing *legumes* into warm soil between May and August. Autumn Sown Cover mixes should be sown as soon as possible after harvest or into a standing crop before harvest and definitely by mid September.

How to sow

Mixes can be broadcast or direct drilled into stubble at a maximum of 10mm. Ideally, into warm soils when rain is imminent.

Management

Summer crops can be ready for incorporation after 8-10 weeks normally at the onset of flowering, before sowing a winter cereal. Winter *cover crops* can be terminated and incorporated in early spring. Westerwolds ryegrass will regrow after cutting so can be left through the summer for further cutting or mulching. To minimise the risk of ryegrass seed being shed, it is best to cut before the seed heads are visible.

On heavier soils it may be beneficial to terminate winter *cover crops* early in the spring to allow soils to dry out and *biomass* to breakdown before spring drilling.

Yield potential

The amount of N fixed by *legumes* is dependent on the success of the *green manure*. It is generally accepted that a reasonable crop can fix in excess of 100kg N/ha from a spring or summer sowing. *Legumes* only fix nitrogen in warm conditions. Overwinter *cover crops* such as westerwolds, Rye or Brassicas will collect N from the soil.

Catchment Sensitive Farming

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for farmers**

CATCHMENT SENSITIVE FARMING



Issue No.14 May 2020