

## EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK COMMITTEE

16 NOVEMBER 2004

### ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP – FARM ENVIRONMENT PLANS

#### Report of the Head of Conservation and Land Management

**Purpose of Report:**

To seek the approval for officers of the Authority to offer to prepare Farm Environment Plans for farmers on Exmoor and to charge for this service at the rate that can be recovered by the farmer from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

**Legal Implications including Human Rights Act 1998:**

S65 Environment Act 1995 gives the Authority the general power to do anything which, in the opinion of the Authority, is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to the accomplishment of National Park purposes or the carrying out of any functions conferred on it by virtue of any other enactment.

**Financial Implications:**

The work will generate an income that will be dependent on the number and complexity of plans prepared

**National Park Purposes:**

By working closely with individual farmers to prepare these plans the Authority's officers can ensure that Environmental Stewardship delivers maximum benefits to the environment and enjoyment of Exmoor in ways that are compatible with farm businesses

**RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the Authority SUPPORTS the proposal to offer to prepare Farm Environment Plans for farmers within the National Park and that it makes a charge for this service at the rate that can be recovered by the farmer from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and establishes a set of charges for the provision of advice and information that is requested for commercial or grant submission purposes.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In 2005 a new agri-environment scheme, Environmental Stewardship, will be introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to replace the existing Environmentally Sensitive Area and Countryside Stewardship schemes.
- 1.2 Environmental Stewardship is composed of three elements: Entry Level Stewardship, Organic Entry Level Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship
- 1.3 To apply for Entry Level Stewardship the farmer must accumulate a threshold of points based on the size and broad characteristics of the farm by selecting a number of options from a menu of items, all of which are allocated a score.

- 1.4 The application must be accompanied by a Farm Environment Record - a simple map of the farm showing major features, hedges and walls, archaeological features, traditional buildings, trees and woodland, rivers, streams and wetlands, orchards and unimproved land.
- 1.5 To enter the Higher Level Stewardship the application must be accompanied by a Farm Environment Plan which is much more detailed than the Farm Environment Record and identifies all the environmental assets and opportunities on the farm and indicates how these might be delivered through Higher Level Stewardship.

## **2. FARM ENVIRONMENT PLANS**

- 2.1 The Farm Environment Plan provides details of all the environmental information for the farm, including wildlife species and habitats, landscape characteristics, historic features, resource protection (priority catchments and soil erosion risk), flood and coastal management issues, genetic conservation opportunities (rare breeds of livestock and traditional orchards) and existing and potential access.
- 2.2 The plan records these features on a field by field or whole farm basis as appropriate, assesses their importance in relation to national, regional or local criteria (including Biodiversity Action Plans) and their current condition and the how they need to be managed through the Higher Level Stewardship.
- 2.3 Unlike Farm Environmental Records, which farmers should be able to prepare themselves, DEFRA recommends that Farm Environment Plans, because of their complexity, are prepared for the farmer by a specialist consultant. Grant aid of £320 per day is offered. The payments are banded - based on the size of the farm - from £320 for less than 5 hectares to £3200 for a farm of more than 3000 hectares. This is paid even if the farm is not accepted into Higher Level Stewardship, as it is considered that the plan will still be useful when planning the development of the farm business.
- 2.4 The preparation of Farm Environment Plans provides the opportunity to ensure that all the important elements of the National Park landscape, wildlife and cultural heritage are identified on each holding, thus maximising the likelihood of gaining entry into the Higher Level Stewardship and securing their appropriate management. By preparing the plan in detailed consultation with the farmer the conservation management proposals can be integrated with the other elements of the farm business.

## **3 THE ROLE OF NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

- 3.1 The Authority will be the contact for all the historic environment information for farms in the National Park. Outside the National Park, County Councils and Unitary Authorities will provide this data. Farmers or their consultants are obliged to obtain this information for their Farm Environment Plans.
- 3.2 The NPA also holds more biological, landscape and access information and knowledge about Exmoor than any other body, so will, no doubt, be contacted by most people preparing Farm Environment Plans but, unlike for the historic environment, there is no obligation imposed by DEFRA to contact the NPA for this information.
- 3.3 The most effective way to ensure that all the relevant information is presented in the Farm Environment Plans, and that the proposals maximise the opportunities to achieve National Park purposes, would be for the Authority to offer to prepare these plans for Exmoor farmers. In this way we could ensure that, for example, opportunities to recreate habitats were identified, but only where there would be no damage to the historic environment and where it would be appropriate in the landscape. In addition, these Plans are an opportunity to deliver public access benefits set out in the Exmoor Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The Authority

manages all public access in the National Park including the new right of open access under Part One of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

- 3.4 By being closely involved with the farmer at the planning stage, Authority staff can be much more effective in ensuring an integrated set of proposals than they can be when brought in at a much later stage through a formal consultation. This approach is in line with Lord Haskins' recommendations to simplify the delivery of DEFRA schemes by more effectively integrating advice locally. All other English National Parks, with the exception of the Broads, are planning to prepare Farm Environment Plans for farmers in their areas.
- 3.5 This work would be carried out by officers in the Conservation and Land Management Section, principally the Conservation Assistant (Farming and Wildlife) and the Countryside Archaeological Advisor, assisted by our Conservation Trainees and the Technical Support Officer. There would be specialist input from other members of the Conservation and Land Management team and the Recreation and Tourism team.
- 3.6 It is suggested that when the NPA is invited to prepare the whole Farm Environment Plans it should charge farmers the grant rate that is recoverable from DEFRA. Where others are preparing the plan, the charge for historic information will be based on a nationally agreed payment scale, while for biological and access information there would be an hourly charge based on the salary and on-costs of the member(s) of staff providing the advice. This is in line with charges proposed by other National Parks.
- 3.7 Until Environmental Stewardship is formally launched in 2005 only those land managers whose Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme or Countryside Stewardship scheme agreements come to an end in 2005 are being offered the chance to prepare Farm Environment Plans – about 60 farms within the National Park. For these farmers, the closing date for requests for application packs was 31 October 2004, but DEFRA have said that it will accept late requests. Completed Farm Environment Plans should then be returned to DEFRA by April 2005, although it is anticipated that this deadline will be extended to July 2005. Of these, not all will wish to go into the Higher Level Stewardship scheme, while others will chose to have their Farm Environment Plans prepared by others. It seems that the NPA is unlikely to be asked to prepare more than 30 Farm Environment Plans in the next six months though we may need to provide at least historic environment information for up to a further 20 farms. A further 38 farms whose ESA agreements reach the 5 year break clause in 2005 and a few farmers who did not renew their ESA agreements in the last two years may also wish to access the Higher Level Stewardship when it is launched in summer 2005. It is not clear yet when they will be able to apply to prepare Farm Environment Plans.
- 3.8 The demand in 2006 and 2007 is unlikely to exceed this level (30-50) and it is considered that, in view of the vital importance of this process to the achievement of National Park purposes, the work programmes of existing staff could be adjusted to cope with the preparation of Farm Environment Plans although this would need to be kept under review.

**David Lloyd**  
**Team Leader (Moorland and Wildlife)**  
**27 October 2004**

**Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:-**

**2004 Farm Environment Plan Guidance handbook Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs**