



Agriculture & Rural Development Committee Inquiry into agri-environmental schemes in Wales

RSPB Cymru - Summary of issues Dec 2002

RSPB Cymru, welcomes this opportunity to present views to committee on agri-environment schemes in Wales. We have produced a summary of issues below, however this should be read in parallel with our more detailed response to the committee inquiry.

1. RSPB Cymru strongly supports Tir Gofal as the National Assembly's key mechanism to address farmland biodiversity declines. The National Assembly pledged in BetterWales to reverse the decline in farmland birds by 2010 and the RSPB believes that Tir Gofal is one of the main programmes that will contribute towards this aim.
2. We have serious concerns that the current level of funding for Tir Gofal is not adequate to see the cumulative benefits in habitat blocks, biodiversity and rural job creation shown by Tir Cymen. We believe that the National Assembly must set a target of 50% of farms in Wales into Tir Gofal by 2010.
3. RSPB Cymru welcomed the recommendation in last years Tir Gofal stock-take to introduce a group application approach. We believe there are significant benefits to be gained from this approach for both wildlife and rural development , particularly in areas such as river catchments and common land management.
4. We support the "tiered " approach to accessing agri-environmental payments and in particular the creation "Broad and Shallow" (Tir Gofal 1) scheme to allow more farmers to improve their environmental management. Such a scheme should be seen as a way to bring farmers into higher levels of Tir Gofal in the longer term.
5. It is important that there is sufficient levels of funding available to allow significant numbers of farmers to enter into a "Broad and Shallow" scheme. This fund must be over and above current Tir Gofal funding. It is likely that a "Broad and Shallow" scheme which aims to bring in 80% of farmers currently not in other agri-environment schemes, will require more than the £10.5 million currently in the budget for 2005 in the longer term.
6. We are strongly supportive of the whole farm scheme approach to achieve the real biodiversity gains. There is no evidence to suggest that part-farm schemes have delivered biodiversity benefits over and above benefits that can currently be delivered through CROW Act section 96 agreements. We believe that these management agreements are the mechanism to deliver biodiversity benefits on small areas on farms.
7. There is a case to expand the role of Farming Connect environment advice to assist farmers with the "form filling" aspect of entering agric-environment schemes.

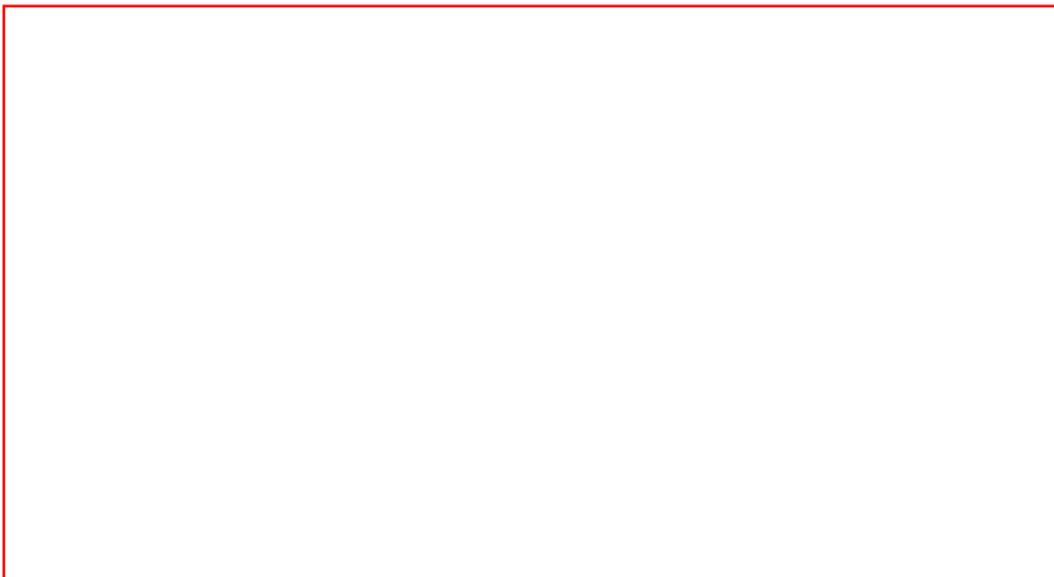
Comments by RSPB Cymru

1. Thank you for your letter inviting comments on Agri-environmental schemes in Wales. We welcome the opportunity to submit comments on the effectiveness of Tir Gofal in delivering its objectives and to make

recommendations for the future shape and funding of an integrated and tiered system of agri-environmental schemes in Wales.

2. RSPB Cymru has long advocated the importance of farm habitats for farmland birds and other wildlife. The Society contributed to the National Assembly's Farming for the Future publication that highlighted the importance of agriculture not only in delivering safe and healthy food but also a countryside that is visually attractive and rich in biodiversity. **The growth in demand amongst the farming community for agri-environmental schemes and organic farming illustrates a fundamental move away from quantity production towards sustainable agricultural practices that compete less on price and more on quality.**
3. RSPB Cymru recognise that good quality food, **a countryside rich in wildlife**, clean air, water and cultural diversity all **depend on a viable and sustainable farming industry**. Nevertheless with CAP reform on the agenda and a substantial movement away from production subsidies towards rural development measures envisaged, the growth of agri-environmental schemes in Wales is destined to grow in importance.
4. The Society commented on the National Assembly Tir Gofal Stocktake consultation and supported the schemes aims in delivering sustainable agriculture. This is one of the main reasons why **RSPB Cymru supported the initial intention of the scheme to sign up to 50% of farm holdings in Wales within 10 years** and so reach the penetration levels seen by Tir Cymen and ESAs.
5. RSPB Cymru believes that it is important that a wide range of habitats (and species) are included in the scheme because Tir Gofal is currently the main delivery mechanism of the UK Biodiversity Plan in the wider countryside. This is acknowledged in the Sustainable Development Scheme by the inclusion as a Headline Indicator on the populations of wild birds. The scheme in its totality, covering the whole of Wales, requires to have a very wide range of options for land management – it requires to be much more complex than the more limited geographical ESA and Tir Cymen schemes for example.
6. We strongly support the whole farm approach of Tir Gofal. Whilst one possible option of 'making the money go further' would be to introduce payment **capping** on Tir Gofal agreements – **we do not support** this. It has taken place in Scotland on some schemes and fails to deliver the range of benefits (environmental, social and economic) that we expect from an agri-environment scheme. It is essential that options be reviewed to enable a greater number of farmers to benefit from the scheme.
7. Whilst two of the main aims of Tir Gofal is the management and restoration of unimproved habitats, there is **a need for the scheme to also assist traditional family farms who currently operate intensive farming practices but wish to become less intensive and more extensive in their grazing regimes**. These may include lowland mixed arable and livestock farms and dairy enterprises in the Less Favoured Areas of Wales (predominantly DA areas). Analysis of data provided to this very Committee on the 7th November 2001, highlighted that during the third application round, "there was little discernable change in the type of eligible application with the vast majority made up of sheep and beef units (89%) whilst the percentage of dairy farms continued to remain low (2.4%)". **It is imperative that a balance is kept in the farm types accepted into the scheme, as we believe it is crucial in building long term support amongst the agricultural community.**
8. We suggest that Tir Gofal's success should not be determined entirely by the number of holdings entering the scheme, (which have been hindered by the emergence of foot and mouth disease and accompanying administrative difficulties) but more importantly in terms of the **environmental benefits generated**.
9. The Society welcomes the environmental benefits currently delivered through Tir Gofal which now protects 4,480 hectares of semi-natural broad-leaved woodland, 11,126 hectares of upland, coastal and lowland heath and 12,799 hectares of unimproved grassland. Similarly, 16,000 hectares of open access has now also been secured with over 800 kilometres of hedgerow been /being restored. RSPB Cymru concurs that significant improvements to the farmed landscape have been secured through Tir Gofal and very much hopes that as more farms join the scheme, cumulative effects of nearby or adjoining farms participating in Tir Gofal will become more apparent. RSPB Cymru welcomed the recommendation within last year's stock take to introduce a measure in support of a group application approach. **The Society perceives that such an approach helps achieve early targets in key areas whilst also creating full-time rural jobs and encourage young people to stay in rural communities.**
10. RSPB Cymru acknowledges that once familiar farmland birds will take time to re-establish themselves in the Welsh countryside but believe that baseline samples of habitats on farms are imperative in assisting in due course,

the implementation of wider scale surveys of key farmland bird species currently in decline. **Nevertheless, research into agri-environmental scheme options (Countryside Stewardship) carried out by RSPB in South Western England resulted in positive results for the Cirl Bunting.** During the late 1980's it became apparent that the cirl bunting was heading towards extinction in the UK, with a previously much larger population across southern England reduced to only 114 pairs by 1989. A species recovery programme was initiated by the RSPB and English Nature, which involved identification of the key needs of the species and the resultant tailoring of the Countryside Stewardship scheme to fit these needs. Following the appointment by the RSPB of a dedicated project officer, farmers were encouraged to apply for and implement the scheme, resulting in **an increase in population of the cirl bunting to 453 pairs in 1998.** This trend is further illustrated in the below diagram.



The Society looks forward to assisting CCW and the Welsh Assembly Government (where appropriate) **in developing research programmes for and monitoring the farmland bird benefits of Tir Gofal.** We believe we should be working together positively to promote farmland bird recovery programmes.

11. With regard to the future development of agri-environmental schemes in Wales, RSPB Cymru have been actively involved in the Agri-environment Working Group, one of the three CAP Reform working groups established to deliver on the recommendations and aspirations outlined in the Farming for the Future document. The Society notes that there is a general recognition that sophisticated and targeted agri-environment schemes, however good they are (and Tir Gofal is one of the best), will only be able to cover a proportion of farms, when what is needed is change on a much greater scale and at a much faster speed. To meet this very aim, RSPB Cymru (with assistance from CCW and Environment Agency Wales), submitted its version of a Broad and Shallow Scheme to the Agri-environment Working group for discussion.
12. The Society concurs that a more integrated and tiered system of agri-environmental schemes in Wales will be imperative if the Welsh countryside is to regain many of its lost treasured habitats and features at a landscape scale. As outlined in the accompanying tiered pyramid diagram in Annex 1, RSPB Cymru recommends that a Broad and Shallow Scheme (TG1) could sit underneath the current Tir Gofal scheme (TG2) and provide an 'entry level' opportunity for many farmers to participate in the agri-environmental scheme ethos. On the higher levels of the pyramid (TG3), more specifically enhanced levels of assistance could be made available to farm holdings which deliver the highest environmental benefit per hectare. **By definition, the higher tiers within the pyramid must generate greater environmental benefits and could include measures for special projects such as flood management, common land management or targeted management measures of benefit to key farmland bird species in decline such as lapwing.**

13. The development of a Broad and Shallow agri-environment scheme (a lot of farmers, all managing their land in a more diverse manner) **would underpin rather than undermine**, the existing Tir Gofal Scheme. **RSPB Cymru have emphasised that for the scheme to be successful, the Broad and Shallow Scheme would need to be administratively simple to implement and reward farmers financially in the same year that their payments are modulated.** A Broad and Shallow Scheme could provide a much needed impetus towards the Welsh Assembly Government's vision of an innovative agri-food industry that would also create a Welsh countryside rich in biodiversity and wildlife.
14. RSPB Cymru emphasises that the introduction of a BSS should be seen as a means of encouraging farmers to try out an agri-environment approach that would be paid on a flat rate per hectare basis (to break the headage payment link) and be tiered by farm size. **The scheme should be promoted as a feeder mechanism in drawing farmers' attention towards the benefits and attributes of Tir Gofal.** Moreover, RSPB Cymru concurs that this proposal could provide a viable way forward in maintaining financial support for farmers who concentrate on quality produce whilst safeguarding the environment and ensuring public monies deliver multiple public benefits.
15. The Society also acknowledges the growth in organic farming and firmly **supports the expansion of the sector in Wales. Nevertheless, with the growth in demand for organic produce predicted to continue, we are concerned that organic farming will become increasingly intensive. Without conservation standards, there is a risk that the environmental benefits of organic farming systems - and the organic sector's environmentally friendly image - could be jeopardised.** The Society believes that **maintenance payments for organic production should be considered provided organic producers meet high environmental standards.** These on-going payments could take the form of an organic strand in a potential Broad and Shallow Scheme. This organic strand would reward organic farmers for the conservation benefits they deliver not solely because of their organic status.
16. RSPB Cymru is converting some of its **own grazed reserves to organic with the underlying aim of demonstrating that sustainable management of livestock** (both cattle and sheep) can be an integral part of habitat management as well as an important element within any commercial organic enterprise. However, notwithstanding any potential biodiversity benefits of organic farming, we perceive that the general reduction of inorganic and other chemical inputs to the farmed environment is beneficial in its own right and should be strongly supported as a part of the Welsh Assembly Government's vision for sustainable agriculture.
17. RSPB Cymru also believes that designated sites, high value habitats and access benefits that cannot be managed through a basic BSS or Tir Gofal will always need extra financial support. **Payments in this section (TG3) need to be higher, reflecting the more demanding management and commitment by farmers.** RSPB Cymru considers that SSSI management agreements should remain as separate payments from agri-environment funding but believes full co-financing of agri-environmental measures from EU budgets should be secured before SSSI payments "kick in".
18. Many policy areas could also benefit from land management options in this category. **The Welsh Assembly Government** should examine overlapping areas and **set joint objectives where resource contributions from other policy areas could be amalgamated** to fund relevant farmland activities, such as wetland creation (from Flood Defence budget) and woodland restoration (from Forestry Commission budget) should be considered. Examples of other such programmes could include the delivery of new flood storage capacity within river systems and the enhanced management of common land. The longer-term integration of these policy areas is desirable, notably between forestry and agricultural regimes.
19. We realise **that to achieve some of the wider gains** (especially in relation to species recovery, large scale habitat restoration, management of Common land and flood management) **there would need to be some targeting of agreement land in Tir Gofal (TG3).** While this is currently not allowed under the scheme, we believe that the National Assembly should explore mechanisms whereby some targeting can be included alongside the current "open to all" approach.
20. RSPB Cymru firmly believes that an integrated and tiered system of agri-environmental schemes in Wales will play an increasingly important role in the future direction of Welsh agriculture. The popularity of Tir Gofal has shown that the farming community is willing to react to governmental policies that reward sustainable agricultural practices. However, this increased demand will continue to result in inevitably implications for both policy and funding allocation. Nevertheless, with further CAP reform on the agenda and the accession of new countries into

the European Union, producing safe and healthy food whilst also maintaining a countryside which is visually attractive and rich in biodiversity, will become paramount. **Intrinsic to this vision** will be the **further development of Tir Gofal and the implementation of a potential Broad and Shallow Scheme** that would offer farmers the **opportunity to re-evaluate their farming practices and promote agricultural activities that generate both quality produce and a quality environment.**

RSPB Cymru 16.09.02.

Annex 1.

