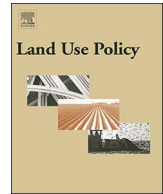




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Understanding farmers' motivations for providing unsubsidised environmental benefits

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines farmers' motivations for voluntary unsubsidised practices that benefit the environment. It identifies amongst a group of English farmers the amount of unsubsidised environmental activities on mainly arable land, and explores the extent to which motivations are extrinsic and intrinsic for undertaking this unsubsidised activity. Using responses from a national survey in England of 1,345 farmers, in-depth face-to-face interviews with 60 farmers and an analysis of existing agri-environment scheme data, the extent to which subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activity is undertaken on arable land was identified. Furthermore, it was also possible to identify and compare the motivations behind subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activity and to understand the interaction between these two types of activity at the farm scale. The research found that around 25% of all environmental activity undertaken on arable farms in England is unsubsidised, although some of this activity sits alongside subsidised activity. There were clear differences between the motivations for undertaking subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activities. Financial reasons dominated farmers' motivations for engaging in subsidised agri-environment scheme practices, whilst agronomic and environmental motivations were of greater importance for unsubsidised activity. Data analysis also revealed over-subscription in agri-environment schemes, with a considerable amount of environmental activity occurring without payment. From a policy perspective it is helpful to understand motivations for existing unsubsidised environmental activity as this can inform the design of advice and message framing to encourage uptake of more widespread voluntary environmental behaviour.

1. Introduction

Agriculture in Europe has been affected by multiple drivers of change since the Second World War, including a post-war political drive for agricultural intensification to ensure food security, demographic changes through urbanisation and rural-urban migration, improvements in technology and economic processes resulting in a cost-price squeeze on agricultural production (Van Vliet et al., 2015). This process has led to a broadly similar aggregate response to agricultural production across Europe; intensification of the most productive land and extensification (and in some cases abandonment) of the least productive land (Van Vliet et al., 2015). These changes in agricultural management practices have created agricultural systems that are successfully leading to increased productivity, with farms that are larger, more specialised in production and working with a reduced labour force, but often at the expense of the environment (Plieninger et al., 2016). As is well documented, some of these modern agricultural practices have resulted in considerable environmental and health costs (Pretty et al., 2000).

The policy response to this impact of agriculture on the environment has been to increase beneficial environmental management through three distinct mechanisms. One mechanism is regulation, which has been used to enhance environmental behaviour to protect the environment. A second mechanism is agri-environment schemes (AES), whereby farmers are paid for voluntarily undertaking specified environmental actions. This activity is referred to later in the paper as subsidised environmental activity. A third mechanism is the use of social approaches, whereby farmers are encouraged to undertake environmental management activities without financial reward or coercion, referred to in this paper as unsubsidised environmental activity.

Interest in promoting unsubsidised environmental activity has ebbed and flowed in recent decades. Agricultural producer groups have promoted industry-led agri-environment initiatives in an attempt to dissuade the Government from implementing environmental regulation in the face of growing public pressure over environmentally damaging agriculture practices (Cox et al., 1985, 1986; Clark and Jones, 1998). This approach also resonates with the neo-liberal interest in shifting

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responsibility away from government with a greater emphasis on civic responsibility, giving rise to ‘social approaches’ (Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Potter and Tilzey, 2005). Furthermore, there has been increasing Government support for industry-led partnerships in England, such as the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE). The CFE is a partnership of agricultural industry and environmental organisations that aims to maintain and improve the environmental condition of agricultural habitats and landscapes by working with farmers and advisers to embed environmental management as a core principle of all farm businesses for which they receive no financial reward (Clothier and Pike, 2013). The CFE was also promoted as a means of combatting the threat of further regulation of management practices on arable land through the introduction of compulsory set-aside (Tasker, 2009). However, to date, there is a paucity of research on the use of non-monetary voluntary approaches to achieve nature conservation benefits (Santangeli and Laaksonen, 2015). Little is currently known about the amount of unsubsidised environmental activity occurring across the farming community and we present some empirical evidence identifying the extent of this activity amongst English farmers and compare some of its characteristics with subsidised environmental activity.

There is a distinct body of research that has explored farmers’ motivations for undertaking various environmental activities, by which we mean the reasons or driving force behind a particular behaviour.

This work has looked at farmers’ motivations for complying with regulations (Winter and May, 2001) and the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for undertaking subsidised activities through AES (Home et al., 2014; Van Herzele et al., 2013). Recent work has also found that intrinsic motivations related to the concepts of self-identity and personal norms were important in influencing the intention to undertake unsubsidised conservation activities (Lokhorst et al., 2011; Van Dijk et al., 2016). However, little else is known about the motivations for unsubsidised agri-environmental behaviour and particularly with respect to specific environmental management practices. As environmental practices that are undertaken voluntarily, without coercion or incentives, have a greater potential for sustained and durable benefits (Mills et al., 2016), we believe that this type of activity, in particular, requires more attention.

Given the limited understanding of unsubsidised environmental activity on farms, the aim of this paper is three-fold. Firstly, to consider the extent to which subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activity is undertaken, focusing particularly on arable land. Secondly, to describe and compare farmers’ motivations for undertaking subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activity; and thirdly to understand the interaction between these types of activity at the farm scale. The proposition is that by having a better understanding of these motivations it may be possible to achieve greater engagement in environmental activity amongst the farming community and to design advice, information and message framing that responds to and supports farmers’ main drivers for undertaking unsubsidised environmental management activity.

In the next section we discuss different policy approaches to influencing environmental behaviour change and how an understanding of motivations can help with message framing to encourage voluntary environmental behaviour. In Section 3, we describe our methodology and in Section 4 we present new empirical findings on the pattern of uptake of subsidised and unsubsidised environmental activity in England and provide insights into the motivations that lead to voluntary environmental behaviours in farmers. In Section 5, we discuss the implications of our findings for message framing and engagement strategies.

2. Policy approaches to environmental behaviour change

As previously mentioned, there are a number of policy approaches that can be used to change environmental behaviour on agricultural

land, including regulations, economic incentives and social/voluntary approaches (Oecd, 2001), although in practice, many policies use levers that fall into more than one of these categories.

Regulations aim to change behaviour by requiring certain management practices or placing particular legal obligations upon managers of rural land. For example, the establishment of Nitrate Vulnerable Zones (NVZs) under the European Union (EU) Nitrates Directive areas in which farmers’ nitrogen fertiliser practices are restricted. It has been argued that regulation—i.e. prohibiting actions that are deemed unacceptable—should form a ‘baseline’ level of behaviour or a ‘reference level’ which it is assumed that society wishes all land managers to observe in carrying out their activities (Fuentes, 2004; Oecd, 2001). Regulatory approaches seem to work best in situations where the target group is already, or can relatively quickly be, persuaded that the regulated actions clearly fall below an acceptable ‘reference level’ of responsible farming practice (Oecd, 2001). It is hoped that through regulatory approaches an enforced change in behaviour will ultimately lead to a change in attitude towards environmental practices (Davies and Hodge, 2006), although evidence of such positive behavioural change is limited unless combined with other approaches (Barnes et al., 2013). For example, Riley (2016) identified that only when closer environmental regulations were combined with longer-term AES participation were AES activities considered by the farming community as ‘good farming’ practices. In fact, there is increasing recognition that command and control regulatory approaches are often overly bureaucratic and expensive (in terms of monitoring and enforcing compliance). Also it has been argued that formal legal approaches to environmental management de-motivates the individuals concerned, discouraging them to take an active approach to environmental stewardship and deliver sustainable, long-term benefits (Koontz, 2003; Spash and Biel, 2002).

The rationale of applying and implementing economic compensation in agri-environment policy and schemes is based on market failure to deliver the socially desirable level of environmental quality (Pearce and Turner, 1990). The evidence suggests that these economic incentives are an important factor to increase farmers’ explicit participation in environmental management, in particular if payments and schemes are tailored to local natural and agronomic conditions (Bräuer et al., 2006). However, whilst some evidence suggests that AES can deliver durable changes in farmers’ attitudes and behaviour (Crabtree et al., 1999; Darragh and Emery, 2017; Fish et al., 2003), others argue that AES have not resulted in a broad pro-environmental behavioural change amongst European farmers (Burton et al., 2008; Van Herzele et al., 2013). Some would argue further that AES have created complacency with farmers only adopting agri-environmental options that require no or minimal effort (Hodge and Reader, 2010; Schmitzberger et al., 2005; Wilson and Hart, 2000) and viewing environmental management as a public good for which they should be paid to deliver (Hodge and Reader, 2010). Several observers also suggest that the payment of subsidies for agri-environmental contracts might discourage innovation and long-term commitment, as farmers are not rewarded for doing any more than the minimum required to receive payments (Burton et al., 2008; Deuffic and Candau, 2006; Kaljonen, 2006).

Therefore, in the UK, there is increasing interest in the use of social/voluntary approaches to encourage behavioural change. It is suggested that shifting farmers’ extrinsic motivations for undertaking environmental management activities to more intrinsic ones is necessary to ensure sustained and widespread environmental improvements (De Snoo et al., 2013; Matzdorf and Lorenz, 2010; Van Herzele et al., 2013; Wilson and Hart, 2001). Furthermore, it is argued that if behaviour change leads to voluntary action then it tends to persist over time as it is more likely to become embedded in social norms (Ayer, 1997).

2.1. Farmer motivations and message framing for environmental activities

There has been recognition of the importance of motivation, and

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