



# Will farmers work together for conservation? The potential limits of farmers' cooperation in agri-environment measures



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## ABSTRACT

There is growing concern that Agri-environment Schemes (AESs) may not be effective in conserving the countryside. Particular concern has arisen around whether the current approach of individual, farm-level, AES agreements are sufficient to encourage more joined-up thinking by offering payments to farmers to form collective agreements, uptake is low and there is very little known about farmers' (non)resistance to such collective conservation. Drawing on in-depth qualitative research with 74 farms across 5 sites in the UK, this paper provides new data on the barriers to farmers' uptake of collective AESs and offers a new formulation of how we understand farming cooperation. The paper advances Bourdieusian-inspired ideas of the cultural construct of 'good farming' by synthesising these with recent reconceptualizations of 'trust' in order to provide a more contextually grounded and temporally-inflected understanding of farmers' cooperative activities. The findings reveal that whilst working relations between farmers are often collegiate, and in places collective, several watershed events over past decades have led to a shift from community-level to process-based (peer-to-peer) trust and a move toward land management being depicted as a squarely individual rather than collective issue. Conceptually, the paper moves beyond the current limitation of viewing trust, and the associated development of social capital – seen as a prerequisite for more collective AESs – as cumulative and one-directional to highlighting their multiple, issue-specific, nature which may become eroded and (re)developed over time. Alongside this, the paper offers a new way of understanding the good farmer by shifting the focus from the individual farm/farmer level to a more fine-grained and contextualised issue-centered notion of good farming. This is then used to explain the seeming reluctance of land holders, evidenced in official statistics, to engage in collective AESs.

## 1. Introduction

Farmland conservation has become an increasingly central focus of European agricultural policy in recent years. Indeed [Batary et al. \(2015, p. 1008\)](#) have suggested that it has become an 'obsession' – pointing to both monetary outlay on agri-environment schemes (AESs) as well as the total areas under scheme management.<sup>1</sup> Now, over three decades since their first introduction, there is an emerging critical reflection on the success of AESs, with some criticisms levelled at both their economic benefits ([Quillérou et al., 2011](#)) and, more fundamentally, the ecological and biodiversity benefits they offer ([Kleijn et al., 2006](#)).<sup>2</sup> In particular, questions have been raised over their broader-scale benefits and whether AESs can adequately facilitate 'coherent and resilient' networks, which will support species mobility, reproduction, genetic

diversity, feeding and breeding ranges ([Lawton et al., 2010, p. v](#)), as well as offer the landscape connectivity and permeability which may allow mitigation against climate change ([Hopkins, 2009](#)). A key structural issue for AESs in this regard, particularly as they have been implemented in the UK, is that although they might have a landscape-scale ambition, they have largely been implemented in the form of individual, farm-scale, agreements ([Emery and Franks, 2012; Prager et al., 2012; van Dijk et al., 2015](#)). This format of voluntary delivery – common in most EU countries – may only facilitate partial coverage. That is, individual farms participating in AESs may be surrounded by non-participating ones, which might serve to negate some of the potential biodiversity benefits of participation, such as through effectively creating 'ecological trap' ([Kentie et al., 2013](#)) for example. Related to this, even where adjacent farms may be participating in AESs, the

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, they suggest 3.23 billion euros was spent on AESs by the European Commission in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Although there are earlier examples of schemes aimed at farmland conservation, most European AESs are traceable to the Agricultural Structures Regulation of 1985 (European Union [EU] Regulation 797/85).

#### Alternative approaches

- (1) Rely on the uptake (i.e. the density) of environmental stewardship agreements
- (2) Rely on the uptake of a high number of options which have a high landscape-scale “orientation”
- (3) Support the expansion of farms so fewer farmers cover whole landscapes, reducing the need for collaboration across farms
- (4) Allow conservation project officers (e.g. NE and National Park project officers) to guide and adjust applications at the planning stage, so they can direct any enhancement of natural capital to locations where it has the most benefit from the landscape-scale perspective
- (5) Extend the use of existing HR8/UX1 collaborative options within ESS, for example incentivise neighbouring farmers to (i) link wooded areas to reduce fragmentation and “edge effect”, and (ii) to stagger harvesting of grass for hay making
- (6) Extend geographic targeting. Already used in HLS, areas where landscape-scale approaches might be particularly valuable could be identified and current non-participating farmers in these areas allowed to enter small but strategically important areas of land into ESS (thus removing from them the ESS’s “whole-farm” constraint). Current ESS participants in these areas could be offered additional incentives to create habitats in landscape-scale valuable locations to, for example, increase permeable across the landscape (for example, the introduction of an agglomeration bonus)
- (7) Encourage the development of farmer led, bottom-up, voluntarily membership, environmentally-oriented groups of farmer who are willing to jointly co-ordinate the selection and management of environment management options
- (8) Making some degree of landscape coordination among land managers a compulsory requirement of participation in ESS (as is the case for farmers who share grazing of common land), or, possibly, develop the existing management requirements in existing quasi-compulsory schemes, such as the Single Payment Scheme’s “cross-compliance” environmental requirements
- (9) Allow groups of farmers to tender for pre-designed landscape-scale environmental plans
- (10) Allow farming groups to submit their own landscape-scale environmental plans, which need to conform to but could also develop local and regional landscape-scale objectives

Fig. 1. Alternative approaches to landscape-scale environmental management within formal agri-environment schemes (Franks and Emery, 2013 *Land Use Policy*).

individual, discreet, nature of their agreements may mean that managements may be replicated and desired mosaic effects of habitats not realised (Schekkerman et al., 2008).

In addressing such cross-scalar challenges, DEFRA’s (2011, p. 25) biodiversity strategy points to a vision of “encouraging more collaborative working to achieve landscape-scale action”.<sup>3</sup> As Lawton et al. (2010) suggest, such ambitions require a fundamental ‘step-change’ in the way that farmland conservation schemes operate. Franks and Emery (2013) reflect on several ways that, hypothetically, more collaborative forms of conservation may be developed through AES agreements (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> These range from the current situation of relying on as many individual agreements as possible to add up to a level of landscape protection, through to more proactive – and likely more complex and expensive – options whereby farmers coordinate joint agreements. Villanueva et al. (2015, p. 143) have recently noted in the pages of this journal, that this idea of farmers collectively signing AES contracts has received “scarce attention in the literature” and Stock et al. (2014, p. 412) concur that there is need to pay “greater attention to the micro/macro relationships between actors at and across different scales” including the farm-level. At first glance, the idea of collaborative agreements would seem a logical extension of the current position, particularly if additional financial inducements were offered to cover the transactional costs of such joint agreements. However, the now voluminous literature on individual farmer participation offers several insights to suggest that this issue is likely to be more complicated. First, economic aspects of AES participation are only part of the consideration, with several studies noting that social status and standing may make AESs more or less culturally acceptable and that “structuring subsidy schemes to encourage farmers to co-operate is insufficient to address this issue” (Sutherland and Burton, 2011, p. 252). Second, and related, there may be distinct geographical variations both in farmers’ willingness to participate as well as their ability, in terms of having features on their farm worthy of conservation, to do so. Thirdly, farmers’ conservation practices and environmental ideologies are temporally layered, meaning that how individuals engage with schemes is rarely just a present-centered decision – instead taking in both past farming history and future aspirations (Riley, 2011a, 2016; Wynne-Jones, 2017). Indeed, whilst there are examples of functioning

<sup>3</sup> This is born out of Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 2013 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which states that compensation is available for the transaction costs associated with ‘joint approaches to environmental projects and ongoing environmental practices’ (Supplementary sheet 1.11).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the environmental benefits, others have pointed to the potential economic benefits of collaborative agreements through reduced transactions costs for both governments and individual landowners as well as potentially reducing costs of monitoring and enforcement (Franks, 2011).

environmental cooperatives in areas such as the Netherlands (Renting and Van Der Ploeg, 2001), Westerink et al. (2014, p. 1504) illustrate that such cases may not be easily replicated in other areas in suggesting that: “In the Dutch situation, it has taken decades to develop the culture of cooperation in agri-environmental management”.

The following paper examines whether farmers will collaborate within AESs. It does this through offering a more detailed and nuanced understanding of farmers’ cooperative and collective activities than has existed to date. Specifically, it places current (non)collective activities in wider historical context and in doing so brings much-needed attention to their multiple and multi-faceted nature and the resultant implications for the current desire to foster more collective AESs.<sup>5</sup> Following a review of the broader literature on AESs and cross-farm cooperation, the paper presents the conceptual framing and methodological approach taken in the studies from which the paper is drawn, before presenting its main findings and recommendations.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Farming cooperation and agri-environmental management

There is a large and relatively diverse literature on cooperation within agriculture – both in relation to the empirical foci and geographical contexts, as well as the conceptual approaches taken. Having much of its origins within agricultural economics (see for example Rhodes, 1983), early research in this area focussed specifically on the economic/competitive advantages of farms using cooperative purchasing and marketing. Whilst such research tended to focus on formalised cooperative relations, Emery et al. (2017) note a more recent broadening to informal forms of cooperative relations and their ‘more than economic’ elements, with two clear trajectories: that focussing on cooperation as a movement, such as those around food security and fair trade (see Bacon, 2015) and more micro-scale considerations of how cooperative and collective farming sits alongside (and potentially clashes with) autonomy in (re)framing farmers’ individual identities (Stock and Forney, 2014). The latter strand of this research has paid attention to the importance of social capital within cooperative relations – a theme returned to in the discussion of the paper’s conceptual framing in the next section.

Although cooperative working has featured for some time in rural development policy, particularly relating to community development and cohesion (e.g. Fazzi, 2011), it has only recently been formalised in agri-environmental policy under the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Reviews of extant schemes and cross-farm

<sup>5</sup> The paper does not focus on the contractual and legal issues of such collaborative agreements. For a consideration of these issues see Franks (2011).

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