



A survey exploring private farm advisor perspectives of agri-environment schemes: The case of England's Environmental Stewardship programme



A.P. Hejnowicz^{a,*}, M.A. Rudd^b, P.C.L. White^a

^a Environment Department, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, United Kingdom

^b Department of Environmental Sciences, Emory College of Arts and Sciences, United States

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ABSTRACT

Most stakeholder-based research concerning agri-environmental schemes (AES) derives from work engaging with farmers and land managers. Consequently, the voices and opinions of other actors involved in AES tends to be unrepresented in the wider literature. One group of actors that seem particularly overlooked in this respect are private (independent) farm advisors (i.e., the consultants contracted by farmers and land managers to advise-on AES and agronomic matters). To begin to rectify this knowledge gap we developed an exploratory online survey to explore private farm advisor perspectives in the UK; specifically, the situation in England and advisors' experience of Natural England's Environmental Stewardship programme. A total of 251 Natural England registered farm advisors (29.9%) completed our survey. The majority of these had knowledge and expertise in relation to two (31.5%) or three (42.2%) Environmental Stewardship schemes, with proficiency in ELS (93.4%) and HLS (82.8%) being the most common. On average, advisors had 9.6 ± 5.6 yrs of experience and operated (75.3%) in a single region of England. Although our results concentrated upon a relatively simple set of initial topics of inquiry, the survey revealed a number of interesting findings. Firstly; for example, that in the opinion of the advisors working with farmers applying for Environmental Stewardship schemes, the 'knowledge-exchange encounter' occurring between themselves, their clients and Natural England is fundamental to the environmental effectiveness of these schemes as well as their farm business compatibility. Secondly, respondents suggested that beneath this 'encounter' lie tensions arising from the competing agendas and objectives of the different actors involved which can affect the content of agreements; for instance, farmer selection of management options versus Natural England's target environmental objectives. Farm advisors suggested that they had to negotiate this balance whilst also serving the needs of their clients. Thirdly, respondents raised issues concerning the complicated nature of scheme arrangements, both from their own and farmers' perspectives, as well as the adequacy of payments to cover input costs and matters regarding contractual compliance, all of which they proposed affected farmer participation. Looking ahead, we believe that future AES should account for all of these issues in their design to aid long-term farmer participation, effective agreement implementation and beneficial environmental management.

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1. Introduction

Driven by a range of complex local and global drivers (e.g., globalisation, food security concerns) food production and domestic consumption patterns have undergone rapid transformations

(e.g., FAO, 2003; OECD/FAO, 2011; Tschardt et al., 2012; Poppy et al., 2014). These changes have been accompanied by significant agricultural intensification and extensification (FAO, 2012, 2014; Godfray and Garnett, 2014). Striking a balance between intensification and extensification is a central challenge for modern food production systems (Pretty et al., 2010; Balmford et al., 2012; Grau et al., 2013). Without balance, environmental risks are high and may include deforestation and forest degradation, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, decreased water quality, water shortages, increases in greenhouse gas emissions and changes in biogeochemical cycles (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2010; Quinton et al., 2010; Lambin

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: aphejnowicz@gmail.com, aph504@york.ac.uk

(A.P. Hejnowicz), murray.a.rudd@emory.edu (M.A. Rudd), piran.white@york.ac.uk (P.C.L. White).

and Meyfroidt, 2011; Lenzen et al., 2012; Mills Busa, 2013; WWAP, 2014).

In Europe aspects of the agricultural sector have also undergone a degree of intensification (OECD, 2008), with concomitant repercussions for ecosystems, biodiversity and water resources (e.g., Tschardt et al., 2005; Billeter et al., 2008; Henle et al., 2008; EEA, 2010; Pe'er et al., 2014; Zanten et al., 2014). The continuing problem European Union (EU) Member States face is trying to maintain thriving and competitive agricultural and forestry sectors whilst also ensuring a secure provision of environmental public goods (Allen and Hart, 2013). In response, to resolve this tension, incentive-based management strategies such as agri-environment schemes (AES) have been introduced throughout the EU (Deal et al., 2012; Lastra-Bravo et al., 2015; Lefebvre et al., 2015).

Initially optional, the 1992 MacSharry Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) made AES a compulsory agricultural measure for all EU Member States; with further consolidation via the Agenda 2000 Reform leading to their provision under Pillar 2 of the CAP (European Commission, 2005; McCormack, 2012). Essentially, AES operate through voluntary contractual agreements and provide farmers with payments in return for the delivery of environmental public goods and services and/or the adoption of modern environmentally-friendly farming practices (Garrod, 2009; Lastra-Bravo et al., 2015; Lefebvre et al., 2015). Their implementation is based on the subsidiarity principle, meaning that AES are specially designed to negotiate the particular production-conservation circumstances faced by individual Member States, which they achieve by addressing three intertwined matters, namely: greening farming practices; reducing food production impacts on biodiversity and improving overall countryside management (European Commission, 2005; Smits et al., 2008; European Court of Auditors, 2011; McCormack, 2012; Allen and Hart, 2013; Burton and Schwarz, 2013).

Following their introduction in the UK in 1986 various versions of AES have affected more than 6 million Ha of agricultural land in England alone (Dobbs and Pretty, 2008; Gibbs, 2010; Tucker, 2010). The most significant recent variant, 'Environmental Stewardship', began in 2005 (Chaplin and Radley, 2010). Its purpose—to offer a fresher, more radical, two-tiered approach to land management characterised as 'broad and shallow' and 'narrow and deep' (Hart, 2010). The 'broad and shallow' tier was designed as a non-competitive and open-access arrangement, while the 'narrow and deep' component was configured as a targeted and competitive option for meeting priority environmental objectives (Boatman et al., 2010). In England, the Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) scheme represents the 'broad and shallow' approach, which also includes organic (OELS) and upland (UELS) variants, while Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) represents the 'narrow and deep' element (Boatman et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2010; Supporting information Table S1).

So, how effective are AES schemes at meeting their stated environmental goals? At both the European (e.g., Kleijn and Sutherland, 2003; Kleijn et al., 2011) and UK (e.g., Whittingham, 2007; Boatman et al., 2008; Defra and Natural England, 2008; Whittingham, 2011) scale evidence suggests that their ability to provide environmental and conservation benefits have been relatively mixed. In respect of Environmental Stewardship the picture is similarly mixed, with both positive and negative impacts on the supply of environmental benefits identified. In particular, research has tended to focus on the biodiversity impacts of common in-field, margin and boundary options such as crop rotations, hedgerow management, riparian buffer strips and winter stubble regimes on farmland birds (e.g., Davey et al., 2010a,b; Field et al., 2010; Hinsley et al., 2010; Siriwardena, 2010; Baker et al., 2012; Goodwin et al., 2013; Gruar et al., 2013), and to lesser extents on floristic diversity (e.g., Still and Byfield, 2010; Morris et al., 2010), insect pollinators (e.g., Fuentes-

Montemayor et al., 2011; Critchley et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2013; Peyton et al., 2013), natural resource management (e.g., Ramwell and Boatman, 2010), and ecosystem services (e.g., Rollett et al., 2008; FERA, 2012).

Beyond biodiversity, other analyses have demonstrated that participation in Environmental Stewardship can deliver both human and social capital gains (Mills, 2012), whilst also enhancing local employment and boosting the rural economy (Courtney et al., 2013). Yet, it has also been established that the financial compensation mechanism operated by Environmental Stewardship may promote adverse selection as well as reduce the degree of environmental benefits secured (Fraser, 2009; Quillérou et al., 2011).

Concerning ourselves with the principal agents involved (e.g., farmers, land managers, independent farm advisors and Natural England) in the implementation of Environmental Stewardship, research has generally favoured addressing the farmer element: focusing primarily on understanding the views of farmers (e.g., FERA, 2013a) and their motivations for engagement in these schemes (e.g., Mills et al., 2013) with little attention paid to intermediaries (e.g., advisors)—particularly independent farm advisors. Yet, drawing on evidence from payment for ecosystem service programmes (PES), a similar mechanism to AES, clearly demonstrates the importance of external advisors – especially as facilitators of agreement processes between participants and contracting authorities — due to their capacity to provide specialist knowledge and skills (e.g., Ferraro, 2008; Thuy et al., 2010; Lin and Nakamura, 2012; Huber-Stearns et al., 2013; Martin-Ortega et al., 2013; Schomers and Matzdorf, 2013; Hejnowicz et al., 2014).

In light of this, we posited that examining the farm advisor dimension would represent an important and justified avenue of exploration. By improving our understanding of the views and opinions of farm advisors regarding Environmental Stewardship, it may be possible to identify ways in which to improve the overall implementation and effectiveness of AES: aspects important for achieving conservation objectives, public goods generation and farm business viability. In this research on the English experience, we report results from a survey designed to explore private farm advisors' views regarding their own particular role in the delivery of Environmental Stewardship agreements as well as their opinions concerning farmers, Natural England and other facets of Environmental Stewardship scheme implementation and operationalisation.

Our online survey adopted an exploratory approach, delving into the 'world' of the farm advisor and concentrated on: (i) advisors' views regarding scheme constraints and client motivations and behaviours; (ii) advisors' modes of interaction with their clients and Natural England; (iii) the determinants influencing the content of individual agreements; (iv) mechanisms for balancing client needs and the provision of sufficient levels of environmental public goods, and (v) recommendations for improving the delivery of AES.

It is important to point out that this investigation tells only part of a much larger story. As such, it should be viewed as the starting point, the first stepping stone, to further, more in depth examinations of the farm advisor role which by necessity would need to be triangulate with the views of farmers, land managers and those of Natural England.

2. Background: evidence to support our exploratory approach

In concentrating on the areas (i–v) we were guided by evidence highlighting key determinants of voluntary incentive scheme operationalisation, implementation and effectiveness (e.g., Martin-Ortega et al., 2013; Hejnowicz et al., 2014); the general purpose and structure of AES (e.g., European Commission, 2005) and informed

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