FARMERS AND ADVISORS ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP SCHEME

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Abstract

Attitudes of 25 farmers and 9 advisors towards the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS) in North Norfolk are reported. Simplicity and ease of entering the ELS is contrasted with difficulties associated with applying for the HLS. Advisors rank environmental improvement less important than farmers, and their advice tends to reflect their specialist training. FWAG was the exception. There was support for an intermediate scheme to bridge CSS and ELS, and HLS: this would assist smaller farms and those participating in the CSS. This may increase "people additionality" – which should become a key measure of success for agri-environmental schemes (AES).

Key words: agri-environment schemes, stewardship, advisor(s), farmers, attitudes.

Introduction

In December 2004 the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme (ESA) and the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) closed to new applicants. They have been replaced by the Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS). Opening on 1st January 2005 it has attracted 3.4 million ha under 25,000 separate agreements, with first year payments of £123 million (DEFRA 2006). The ESS has two levels: an Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) which has relaxed the principal of environmental additionality and the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) which has maintained it. Environmental additionality requires agreements to add to the existing stock of environmental capital. Allowing existing environmental features to be entered in an application helps to increase participation rates, a crude measure of "people additionality" (Carey *et al.* 2003), but which is better considered as developing positive attitudes to conservation because this "will in the long-term be more effective than policy measures that do not, since a positive shift in attitudes will increase the output of conservation goods at any specified level of budgetary cost" Colman *et al.* (1992: p.69). The ESS remains a voluntary scheme which is why analysis of farmer's environmental decision making is of great importance (Wilson 1997; Porter, 1998; Wilson and Hart 2000; Buller 1999).

Brief Overview of Environmental Stewardship Scheme (ESS)

Each ELS option selected by the land manager has points attached and farmers need to select options with at least 30 points/ha. Options are recorded on the farm's Farm Environmental Record (FER) which is a map of the land farmed. Acceptance into ELS is guaranteed if all scheme requirements are met. The HLS is a competitive, differentiated scheme. Applicants must be enrolled in the ELS. A large list of

additional options is available within the HLS[1], but only those options outlined in the Targeting Statements attached to each Joint Character Area (JCA) Guidance Notes are awarded points.[2] The sum of points must surpass a funding-threshold and options are recorded on the Farm Environmental Plan (FEP). If so, a Project Officer will decide if the proposal will be accept – but acceptance is still not totally guaranteed (DEFRA 2005a: DEFRA 2005b). Existing agreement holders (in CSS, ESA or Habitat Scheme) have barriers to entering ELS and HLS. However, when the oldest CSS agreement expires the agreement holder will normally be invited to terminate all their existing agreements and apply to enter into a new HLS agreement (DEFRA 2005c). Other changes allow CSS participants to switch to the ESS under prescribed conditions (NFU 2006).

Brief Discussion of Participation Decisions and the "Information Environment"

A recent review of 160 publications and research reports from six EU member states (Finland, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands, Spain and the UK) into the current state of knowledge on factors affecting farmer's attitudes to biodiversity conservation by Siebert *et al.* (2006) concludes that economic considerations are a primary, but not sole, driving force for farmers to participate in AESs. Other influences can broadly be divided into scheme factors (duration, payment levels and structure, application process whole- or part-farm), policy factors (voluntary nature, source of finance, environmental goals), farm factors (size, ownership, landscape), farmer factors (age, wealth, attitudes, education, attitudes to civic duty) and the farmer's information environment (Wilson 1997; Siebert *et al.* 2006). The latter includes the dynamics within the farming region, such as whether neighbours are participating, the influential behaviour of community leaders and the pace of innovation diffusion within a district (Jones 1963; Wilson 1992). However, the information environment has been regarded as a neglected factor in the literature (Wilson 1997) and is a focus of this study.

Research Methodology

The survey involved farmers and farm advisors who work in the ESS's Northwest Norfolk Joint Character Area (JCA), an area not previously designated an ESA. The survey questionnaires are available in Cross (2006). Five farmers were initially selected at random, each gave details of neighbouring farmers who were then approached. All major farm business/agri-business advisors (FBAs) and major agronomy companies in the area were contacted. Of 29 farmers approached, 25 (86%) agreed to participate, the high participation rate supports the survey approach used. Of the ten advisors approached, all initially agreed to participate but one later withdrew.

Findings of the Survey of Farmers

Key results of the research only are presented here, further details are available from Cross (2006). Table 1 shows 12 of the 16 farmers previously in the CSS are currently either applying for or intend to apply for HLS, therefore participation in the CSS is a good, but not exact, predictor of intent to apply for the HLS.

[1] There is a list of over 180 possible features, along with their condition and management prescriptions.

[2] A JCA (of which there are over 150) is defined as an area that has common characteristics in which the environment faces similar threats and opportunities: it has a similar landscape, heritage characteristics and therefore conservation goals. ESS booklets list options and activities that particularly benefit these common conservation goals.

Table 1: Actions and intentions towards joining Higher Level Stewardship, by experience with CSS (N=25).

	In or have been in CSS	Not/never in CSS
Total (N)	16	9
In HLS	0	3
Applying to join HLS	4	0
Intend to apply for HLS in the future	8	2
Do not intend to apply for HLS	4	4

Source: Environmental stewardship: ELS

All those interviewed were either in the ELS or in the process of applying to join. 56% reported mapping problems during application, 36% had waited more than a year for their map, a similar proportion 6 months. Two farmers said that if the problems persisted they would discontinue the process, posing a threat to targeted participation rates if these results are more widely applicable. The main reason given for enrolling in the ELS was to recoup lost income: farmers did not believe they were profiting from participation, but rather simply recouping money that had been "taken away from them" through modulation (Table 2). Some were worried about the inflexibility of the payments. 'Already doing most activities' and 'new activities easily implemented' scored highly for the ELS. "Ease of management"/"goodness of fit with existing practices" was also important – the appeal of relatively undemanding changes to management practices is clear. Environmental improvements and benefits were of little importance in selecting ELS options.

Table 2: Table of descriptive statistics for the whole farmer sample and the groups within the sample. (N=25).

Group	Number in group	Mean age	% with off farm income	Mean farm size	% with previous CSS enrolment	% that are land owners*	% in or applying for HLS
		years	%	Ha	%	%	%
All farms	25	48.5	52	861.2	64	64	28
Those who are/have been in CSS	16	47.4	62.5	959.9	100	62.5	25
Those never in CSS	9	50.3	33.3	685.6	0	66.7	33.3
Farmers with over 800ha	13	50.1	53.8	1223.8	76.9	84.6	38.5
Farmers with less than 800ha	12	46.8	50	468.3	50	41.7	16.7
Those that use AES advisors	21	49.7	52.4	769.1	71.4	57.1	28.6
Those that do not use AES advisors	4	57.5	50	1112.5	25	100	25

* Landowners were often tenants as well.

Source: Environmental stewardship: HLS
Three farmers had enrolled in the HLS and four were actively applying. Of these, 4 stated the major advantage of the HLS over the CSS was higher payments - most described the levels of payment as 'more than fair'. All three currently enrolled in HLS believed that enrolment and implementation was more problematic than for the CSS because of the complexity of submitting applications - nevertheless, all said they would enrol again. Unlike the ELS, all these farmers believed the HLS would improve the environment. Improving shooting was a primary or secondary motivation for 72% of the 7 in or applying proving it to be a particularly important motivation.

Farmers' Information Environment And The Role Of Advisors In Aes Decisions

Discussion with peers plays a significant role in providing information, all farmers said they took notice of the activities of "exceptional local farmers" and would actively seek them out to discuss agricultural issues. 21 (84%) said they had used advisors for AES advice – of these 18 allowed the consultant to strongly influence the content of the agreement. 13 (67%) used FWAG, 8 (40%) used FBAs and 6 (28%) used agronomists.[3] Farmers noted that advisors had become more environmentally based.

Findings from the Survey of Advisors

Nine advisors were interviewed, all offered advice on the ELS[4] and all but one (an agronomist) advised on the HLS even though none of the agronomists and only one FBA had given AES related advice 5 years ago. All said that the proportion of their firm's clients requesting AES advice to had more than doubled within five years; the representative from FWAG said the organisation's workload had doubled. All advisors believed payments were sufficiently high for both ELS and HLS and were happy to encourage participation. Expected 'environmental improvement' (for both ELS and HLS) was of <u>little</u> importance for either group (but particularly among the agronomists). The FWAG spokesperson on the other hand gave 'environmental improvement' as the main reason for enrolment in either level - with 'profitability' and 'improving other enterprises' secondary concerns. Most believed AESs had an important role to play. Agronomist noted the possible negative impact in the long-term: promoting weed growth and transmitting disease.

Overall, advisors placed less importance on 'environmental improvement' in the HLS than farmers generally had, reinforcing the motivation to fulfil business goals, and highlighting a lesser concern for the environmental aims of the ESS. FBAs unanimously believed that profitability was the main reason for enrolment, with ease of implementation also important. All stated that 'already doing most activities', 'new activities easily implemented' and 'little impact on the rest of business' as important reasons for participation. All three agronomists also believed profit was a key reason to enrol – but it was not unanimously a primary motivation. An equal number gave 'raising yields' as a primary reason, stating that the removal of less productive areas meant average yields increased and total inputs decreased.

Further Analysis of Results

Table 1 shows that 4 of the 16 participants in the CSS do not intend to apply for the HLS but 5 of the 9 not previously in the CSS have or intend to apply. Considering the relatively high demands and inflexibility of the HLS, it is perhaps not surprising all previous CSS participants do not intend to apply.

[3] We have classified advisors as primarily Farm Business Advisors (FBA) or mainly agronomists based on their principle training and advice offered. We also interviewed a spokesman for FWAG who advises farmers and trains FWAG advisors.
[4] One of the interviews was with a representative of FWAG, 5 had backgrounds farm business advice and 3 in agronomy.

But it is a measure of some success to have attracted farmers not previously in the CSS in its first year of operation.

The smallest farms (<500ha) have the lowest proportion enrolled into the CSS and the highest percentage with no intention of applying for the HLS, yet all have used advisors for AES matters (in contrast with the largest farms). Smaller farms put greater importance on management and activity implementation, with 6 (86%) noting 'already doing activities' as a primary reason for enrolment compared to 4 (36%) of medium and 4 (57%) of large farms. Interestingly, *smaller farms also noted the importance of environmental improvement more often*. This evidence suggests it is not a lack of motivation that stops participation by smaller farms but an inability to reasonably accommodate the scheme. For these reasons, the ESS, as currently drafted, disadvantages smaller farms.

5 (63%) farm advisors believed that some ELS options were open to too much interpretation. 7 advisors (including FWAG) thought HLS needed changing, believing it to be too elitist and too difficult to submit successful applications. FWAG, 3 of the 5 FBAs and 1 of the 3 of agronomists believed there was room for an **intermediate scheme** between the ELS and HLS, particularly if the HLS was not going to be relaxed.

Discussion

The ELS appears to have overcome the resistance to AESs in this predominately arable area. It is taking over from the CSS in providing income for poorer land but allowing agricultural production to continue elsewhere relatively unaffected. Financial issues appear the key driver with both farmers and advisors. But there is an implication that actions motivated by this belief mean the scheme is not perceived to be voluntary – rather a survival necessity. There are also concerns that the substantial enrolment in the ELS will reduce funds available for the HLS which implies the rate of national modulation will need to increase. The findings suggest that the ELS must be better designed to help farmers prepare farmers for the more demanding HLS. Economic gain is still an important factor in HLS entry. Yet the criticisms of farmers and advisors suggest revisions are necessary to increase participation rates.

There is evidence, albeit within a small sample, that the three categories of advisors offer similar advice but based on different motivations. There are indications that the advice given by the FBA and agronomists reflects their traditional training and former principle areas of advice. Notwithstanding their own views of their improved ability to offer environmental advice, most do not believe the ESS will achieve much in the way of environmental improvement. Without more consideration being given to the environmental aims of the schemes FBAs and agronomists reasons for application are not compatible with many of the farmers' belief that agricultural and conservation achievements can occur together.

A greater level of environmental training is needed to create a more balanced approach in the advisory sector. The majority of advisors point clients to FWAG for information and nearly all use FWAG as a source of advice themselves. FWAG thus plays an important role in helping participants move from the CSS to the HLS and this role is likely to grow as agri-environmental measures and environmental legislation become more important, yet we were told it is unable to keep up with present the demand for its services.

This survey has highlighted a group of CSS agreement holders and farmers of smaller farms who feel they are will not be able to apply for the HLS. This represents a potential loss of willing individuals from the agri-environmental participation. An **intermediate scheme**, helping to transfer current CSS holders and small farms into the HLS, could;

- Incorporate activities currently available within the farmers current CSS agreement(s);

- Increase the number of options available within the JCA's Targeting Statement;
- Specifically include options that support current farming activities, such as shooting, hunting and livery services;
- Reducing areas/lengths attached to each option or reduce the number of points needed per ha for smaller farms (other CAP programmes offer concessions to smaller farms).
- Allow smaller farms to join together to submit a joint application to the HLS such that combined they achieve the target threshold (points/ha) even if individual farmers within the group do not.

These changes will improve transition from the CSS to the new scheme and help smaller farms participate, retain farmers who have experience in environmental management gained under the CSS, and in increasing participation rates. Together, these changes will increase the likelihood of delivering "people additionality".

Conclusions

Although based on a small sample, the research findings should not be dismissed on this basis alone. They indicate areas of particular interest which could be followed up by a larger survey. Enrolment into the ESS is predominately an economic decision based on profitability and productivity so reductions in payments would present a threat to participation. The ELS is not likely to instil a change in attitude toward farming or conservation, partly because advisors (excluding FWAG) share the farmer's opinion that farming comes first in deciding to participate in ELS agreements.

The HLS was criticised for being too demanding - particularly for small farms and to a sub-sample of those currently enrolled in the CSS. This provides support for an intermediate scheme. This would most likely improve the "people additionality" associated with ESS - the voluntary over-delivery of environmental goods – which should become a key measure, along side the change in total stock of environmental benefits, of the successfulness of the ESS.

Advisors have an influential role on ESS applications. FWAG is particularly important in this regard – advising both advisors and farmers. Its environmental background means it gives consistent and reliable advice. There appears some justification for enhancing the funding available for FWAG so it can adequately deal with its influential role and growing workload.

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