

Profitable reasons to get your Countryside Stewardship application in by August 31

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The Countryside Stewardship (CSS) application period is upon us, and with the deadline having been extended from the July 31 to August 31, applicants now have more time to consider which agreement to apply for, and options to select.

One of the main factors behind applicants undertaking a CSS application, besides the environmental benefits it can provide for their holding, is the monetary return they will see from joining the scheme.

This being said, it is therefore well worthwhile considering the profit that can be made from utilising the land for agricultural cropping, compared to the profit that can be made from taking up CSS options on the same parcel.

Take for example a parcel growing feed winter wheat, with, say, a gross margin of £744 per hectare. If you were to plant the same hectare with winter bird food mix, which is option AB9 under both the CSS Mid-Tier and Wildlife Offer, you could receive a payment of £640 per hectare for having planted this crop. The winter bird food mix can be planted in year one and does not have to be re-sown again until year three (of the five-year agreement), with no requirement to fertilise or to spray unless weeds become an issue.

The final bonus of this option is that it does not need to be harvested. As long as the crop is viable there is no need to undertake any further management to receive the £3,200 per hectare over the five years of the CSS agreement.

This, therefore, makes it a very profitable option, and if used on land of low yield for combinable crops, it can provide a higher rate of return than would otherwise be received planting combinable crops and break crops.

An often over-looked option is the hedgerow management option (BE3), which states that a maximum of one third of the



An often over-looked option of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme is the hedgerow management option, says Hugh Townsend of Townsend Chartered Surveyors

hedges entered into the option can be cut in any scheme year (although there is no requirement to cut the hedges at all over the five-year period); it is worth mentioning that this does not include track-side hedges or road-side hedges.

When entering into a CSS agreement it is a requirement that all hedges bordering the option land can only be cut once every two years (50% of the holding in each scheme year). Taking up the BE3 management option pays £8/100m of hedge per year, which although not a large payment compared to other options within the scheme, is still a contribution as there are also

the saved hedge-cutting costs (with average flail hedge-trimming costing between £35-45 per hour when undertaken by a contractor). As the hedges entered into option BE3 will only need to be cut or trimmed once in the five-year agreement (which will not suit all farming enterprises where hedges are used to keep stock in without any fencing), the £8/100m would be equivalent to £40/100m, which can be a useful contribution, as otherwise every farmer is required to cut their hedges but receives no real profit from this maintenance work. Of course bigger flails and machinery is needed but even costing this in, there

will be savings under this option. Another over-looked option which can be used to great effect is option GS17, the grazing supplement, which is an additional payment on top of option GS2 (low input grassland) of £44 per hectare for mowing permanent grassland for hay or silage.

Many applicants and grassland farmers will have grassland parcels that are not suitable for mowing, or which are used for the grazing of livestock. If they are already capable of meeting the requirements for the low input grassland option (the main restrictions are that no supplementary feeding can take place

on the land, only a very low amount of fertiliser can be spread, and no spreading can take place between March 15 – June 20, and the parcel cannot be cut for hay or silage between March 15 – June 30) it may be worth considering this supplementary option.

It is also worth mentioning that for all of these option payments are on top of any Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) payments that are already being received, as a CSS application does not affect the ability of applicants to apply for the BPS.

Therefore, if you have already received a CSS application pack, and have decided not to proceed with an applic-

ation this year, it may be worth re-considering this decision; not just from an environmental standpoint, but also from a purely commercial standpoint, as CSS can provide a guaranteed income for five years.

Considering that the value of produce can be affected by factors over which one has no control, and the unknown future of the BPS payments after Brexit, for some, CSS is a very attractive scheme.

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