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NFU member survey on Countryside Stewardship and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Introduction

The NFU has run a substantial survey of 646 members interviewed at random, covering all areas of the country and all sectors, to establish perceptions of the new Countryside Stewardship (CS) scheme and support for the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE). This has been prompted by member concerns over various aspects of the introduction of the new CS scheme, as well as the threat to future Defra funding of CFE.

Survey results show that:

- There was a high awareness (93%) of CS, but issues with scheme design, the guidance and the application process have deterred members from applying.
- There is strong support (73%) for the NFU continuing to support CFE, and 63% of members are already doing extra for the environment on top of their agri-environment schemes.

The main findings on CS are that:

- Guidance is not user friendly and is insufficient for making decisions and members are considering paying for professional advice.
- Payments are too low compared to what's being asked for and the associated risks.
- It is over complicated, bureaucratic and too prescriptive.
- Small farmers and upland farmers at a disadvantage.

The survey also collected member verbal feedback, and this highlighted:

- *A decline in trust for how existing agri-environment agreements are being managed:* Recently, there have been a number of changes to existing ELS and HLS agreements, including payment changes and proposed increased livestock records requirements, which agreement holders have had no choice but accept.
- *Options do not fit with farming practices:* This is a particular issue for grassland farms where some options do not allow supplementary feeding or the requirements mean stock need to be over wintered away from the farm, negating any CS payments.
- *Payments are too low compared to what's being asked for and the associated risks:* The extra record keeping is incurring costs on agreement holders that appear to not be covered by payments. The overall agreement value seems to be lower yet the perception is that the risks of triggering a penalty are higher. This partly comes from the additional record keeping requirements.
- *There is a cost to develop an application yet there is no certainty of success:* A mid-tier applicant needs to pay for evidence to support an application. The applicant bears these costs without knowing if they would be successful.

Summary of Results

1. Agri-environment schemes are an important part of many businesses and members are aware of and interested in CS:

- 73% have at some stage been in ELS or HLS and 52% are currently in ELS or HLS
- 93% are aware of the new scheme and 42% have personally looked into it.
- Many members rely on agri-environment payments for their farm businesses:
 - 67% of members those in schemes, receive up to 10% of income from agri-environment payments.
 - 15% receive between 11% and 30% of income from agri-environment.
 - For 7% of members, agri-environment represents over 30% of farm income.

2. Members have concerns about how CS could work for their business:

- Out of those that have looked into CS, 59% said that it doesn't offer appropriate options for their business.
- 48% said that joining the scheme would not be worthwhile for their business.
- However, 69% said it would be worthwhile for the environment.

3. There isn't a great appetite for applying for the scheme:

- Out of those that have looked into CS, 49% say they won't be applying with only 23% definitely saying they will apply. The main reason, stated by 51% of these members, was that there is insufficient financial incentive to join the scheme.

4. Members have identified issues with the 2016 application process:

Of those that will or might apply:

- 40% said they were not confident that they have enough information to make an application.
- 44% said they were not confident about filling in the application form.
- Nonetheless, 76% of members that are considering applying said they were confident that they would be able to manage ongoing scheme obligations.

The online guidance has also provided difficulties for members, of those that will or might apply:

- Only 18% were satisfied with the the ease of finding information needed.
- Only 24% were satisfied with the speed of download from the website.
- Only 13% said that the guidance answered their questions.

The lack of confidence in the application process and the online guidance is forcing members to consider paying for professional advice: 74% said they are considering this route.

5. Members continue to support the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE):

- Excluding upland areas where CFE does not operate, 58% said that they are aware of CFE.
- 63% said that they are supporting CFE by taking action to benefit the environment outside of an agri-environment scheme
- 73% think NFU should continue to support CFE (only 5% said that the NFU shouldn't support CFE in the future)
- Only 29% said that when their current stewardship scheme finishes they will remove the environmental options: 19% said that they will continue all of this environmental management, 41% said they will continue some of this management for the environment.