



The Campaign for the Farmed Environment is encouraging farmers and land managers to voluntarily adopt land management practices that will retain and exceed the environmental benefits that used to be provided by set-aside. There is a range of voluntary management measures or ELS options that you can adopt on your farm to benefit the environment, whilst at the same time being agronomically practical.

Name: William and Andrew Pitts
Region: East Midlands
Farm: Grange Farm, Northamptonshire
Size: 300 Ha



Background

My brother and I farm a total of about 600 hectares. Grange Farm is mostly rented and it is one of three blocks of land we farm. The land is pretty heavy, being Hanslope series chalky boulder clay. Our rotation is two successive winter wheats followed by winter oilseed rape. We grow mainly seed wheat but our environmental work gives us access to a lucrative milling wheat contract too. We use non-inversion tillage systems, have our own machinery and do some contracting work. I have a BASIS certificate in crop protection and, including my brother and me, we have three men working across the farms. We have formed a partnership with BASF to demonstrate that best practice agronomy and best practice conservation can work literally side by side.

What environmental management do you already undertake on your farm?

Initially driven by our love of wild game shooting, approximately 7% of Grange Farm is down to conservation crops of some form or other. We entered the farm into Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) in 2005. ELS options include the management plans, two year hedgerow management, plus some grass buffer strips. Much of our 'in-field' conservation crops, such as wild bird seed mix, are currently grown outside of Environmental Stewardship schemes to allow us complete flexibility to conduct exactly what management we want exactly when we want to for best effect. In addition to plots of wild bird seed mix, we have dedicated driving cover which includes dwarf sorghum, millet and linseed and so it also provides some seed and is eligible as a CFE 'Voluntary Measure'. Supplementary feeding and spring predator control is an equally important part of the management we undertake to conserve both game and wildlife.

How will you be/are you taking part in the Campaign?

We plan to renew our Entry Level Stewardship agreement this summer (2010), so contributing towards the CFE target of 70% of agricultural land in stewardship schemes. I have also completed the farm record in the back of the CFE voluntary measures booklet. Subject to being able to agree practical and mutually acceptable management prescriptions with Natural England, we are also considering entering land into Higher Level Stewardship.

Grange Farm has been made the CFE Beacon Farm for Northamptonshire. My brother and I hope to encourage other farmers to grow conservation crops, such as wild bird seed mix, by demonstrating that commercial agricultural practices can go hand in glove with best environmental management

Will you be using an adviser?

We have and will use advisers to help continue to refine our management practices to best achieve our objectives.

What are the benefits of taking part in the Campaign?

My brother and I have enjoyed various benefits of growing conservation crops. First and foremost the crops support growing populations of wild grey partridge and pheasant. Our interest in shooting wild game undoubtedly lead us to grow these crops in the first place, although we now take practically as much interest and pride in the associated wildlife we have on the farm (including the seven different species of warblers). The ELS grass buffer strips we have help to satisfy our LERAP and Soil Protection Review requirements. Our yield maps have shown that the natural predators present in grass margins have significantly reduced the impact of orange wheat blossom midge and so reduced the need to use insecticides.

How does undertaking voluntary management fit in with your farming business?

ELS grass buffer strips and field corners attract payments on areas of land suffering from poor drainage and lack of sun that would otherwise be relatively unproductive and costly to manage. Some prescriptions, such as two year hedge management, both provide wildlife habitat but also simplify management by leaving a hedge uncut after harvest so freeing a man up from an otherwise annual job.

What is driving you to take part in the Campaign?

Neither of us want to see the return of compulsory set-aside with its frustrating regulations. We are also keen to demonstrate that good wildlife habitat can sit side by side with clean, high yielding commercial crops and hope to encourage others to conserve the environment whilst increasing production.