

CHAPTER 8 - Agriculture

Aims:

- Support and assist in developing sustainable and diverse farm businesses.
- Encourage the management of agricultural land for recreational and environmental benefits.
- Forge close links between agricultural and urban communities.
- Forge close links between farming and forestry and seek opportunities for creating and managing woodland.

- 8.1** The dominant force in the landscape of the Forest area has been agriculture. It will continue to exert a great influence in the future and will play a critical role in the creation of the Forest and its long-term future.
- 8.2** Increasingly, agriculture in the Forest is affected by decisions at an international level; World Trade Organisation (WTO) reforms and changes within the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) of the European Union (EU) create the conditions within which farm businesses have to operate. Consumer preferences and market conditions also have a direct effect. The Agenda 2000 reforms to the CAP will be achieved through the Rural Development Regulation which is targeted at a range of mainly voluntary measures, including improving environmental land management and extending woodland.
- 8.3** Agricultural land values have been maintained at high levels, partly by funding from outside agriculture. Farms have grown in size and the number of employees has fallen. Dairying provides a reasonable income though some stock-rearing is decidedly marginal. The beef crisis of the mid-late 1990s has had a deep effect. Many farm businesses are run on a part-time basis, with other income supplementing that from farming.
- 8.4** Some farm businesses have diversified, though examples are not widespread. Whilst there are two privately owned country parks and a few examples of pick-your-own, farm bed and breakfast, holiday accommodation, farm shops, and light-industry conversions, little evidence exists of diversification into woodland-related business. Notable exceptions are farms running trials in connection with energy coppice and leisure

activities in woods. Many redundant farm buildings are converted to dwellings, permanently reducing options for future diversification. Golf course developments and landfill, in particular, are often seen as lucrative options. The planning system is often perceived as being unhelpful.

- 8.5** Farms near urban areas have an added burden, mainly related to trespass. Theft, crop trampling, arson, vandalism, injury to livestock, fly-tipping and car dumping all add to costs. Dog walking and crop trampling may be limited to fields immediately adjacent to housing, though other problems spread further. Many farmers will not put grazing livestock in the urban fringe; work by MAFF in other parts of the country indicates that these problems can cause significant financial loss. They can also create an understandable resistance to more public access. Nevertheless, much new access has been created and existing paths promoted and upgraded. The vast majority of people wishing to enjoy the countryside are law abiding and opportunities exist for farmers to become more involved in innovative solutions to the creation and management of access on farmland.
- 8.6** New woodland planting in general has been limited to small areas of less productive land as there are several barriers to large-scale establishment. Although grants have improved markedly in recent years, many farmers point to reduced cash flow and diminished land values as being strong demotivators. Some will still have development 'hope' for some of their land, and a fear of the implications of increased public access limits enthusiasm for creating new community woodlands. Doubtless, there is a lack of confidence, skill and knowledge regarding woodland planting, farmers being more familiar with crops with much shorter rotations and returns. Sporting shooting offers an incentive to diversify, particularly in relation to set-aside land and new woodlands.
- 8.7** England's Rural Development Plan, drawn up regionally under the auspices of the Rural Development Regulations, proposes a significant increase in support for woodland creation on farms but also bearing in mind the priorities for woodland creation of the England Forestry Strategy. The Forest partners will need to prepare to assist in promoting this support to farmers.

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- 8.8** The Rural Development Plan also proposes encouragement for renewable energy through an Energy Crops Scheme offering a potential source of income for farmers as generating companies seek supplies to meet non-fossil fuel obligations. Grant schemes and the price structure for electricity from energy crops may change in the future. The development of markets close to the crop will be important factors in farmers' decisions.
- 8.9** Agri-environment schemes have been successfully promoted in the Forest, mainly through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) and the Rural Development Plan aims to expand CSS significantly from 2000 to 2007. A significant opportunity exists for Forest partners to work with farmers to enhance the environment and achieve biodiversity objectives within a viable farm business context and to promote DEFRA processing and Marketing Grants.
- 8.10** A recent and successful campaign has been that of local farmers markets; these offer the opportunity for producers to sell directly into urban centres in a more sustainable trading environment. A similar opportunity exists to market locally produced wood products to local people. Both these approaches fit in with policies for rural development.
- 8.11** Several farmers already work with schools, community groups and city farms to increase urban people's understanding and awareness of the agricultural industry and the countryside. As more people are invited to enjoy their rural surroundings, education and interpretation will grow in importance.
- Tenants and owners will be encouraged to bring existing woods into management for timber, wildlife and amenity purposes.
 - The Forest partnership will act as a focus for advice, information, training and joint marketing ventures.
 - The Forest partners will work closely with farmers, occupiers and tenants, including sporting tenants, in resolving problems and conflicts caused by illegal and unauthorised activities in the Forest. The development of a countryside management/ranger service in key areas would play a valuable role in this.
 - New woodlands on farmland will be encouraged through the marketing of relevant grant aid and information, focused on priority areas.
 - Farm businesses will be encouraged to diversify into appropriate opportunities, within relevant planning constraints. The Forest partners will help to develop a joint marketing strategy with these businesses in relation to rural employment initiatives.
 - Farmers will be encouraged and supported in becoming contractors for Forest services, including the management and maintenance of woodlands, Forest paths, signs and stiles. The production of stiles and other timber products could be a useful addition to farm businesses.
 - A whole-farm approach will be adopted where possible to encourage an integrated view of woodland, hedgerow, recreation, and agri-environment opportunities expanding the role and approach of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG).
 - The Forest partners will assist in promoting energy crops on farmland and in developing markets for the end product.
 - Promote DEFRA grants, e.g. Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme, Organic Farming Scheme, Rural Enterprise Scheme.

Proposals

- 8.12** A range of activities will be required to encourage farmers and landowners to become active Forest partners.
- The establishment of the Forest through planting, land management agreements and access agreements will be through an entirely voluntary relationship with farmers, tenants and landowners.
 - The Forest partners will identify, encourage and work with a number of demonstration farm businesses where exemplars of woodland/forestry management, energy crops, tourism, recreation, sport, education, increased access and community links can be established for others to learn from.