

Extended Abstract

Please do not add your name or affiliation

Paper/Poster Title	Farmer and Other Key Stakeholder Attitudes to Results-based Agri-environment Schemes
---------------------------	---

Abstract prepared for presentation at the 98th Annual Conference of The Agricultural Economics Society will be held at The University of Edinburgh, UK, 18th - 20th March 2024.

Abstract	<i>200 words max</i>
<p>Results-based agri-environment schemes (RB-AES), in which farmers are rewarded for environmental performance, are attracting growing interest as an alternative to traditional, action-based schemes that require farmers to follow set prescriptions. Because of their positive impact on skill, motivation and ultimately on environmental outcomes, these schemes are increasingly being viewed as the cost-effective option and the future of AES. This paper reports on a small, in-depth survey of farmers and other key stakeholders to explore attitudes and barriers/solutions to the adoption of RB-AES in Northern Ireland. The survey revealed a positive attitude to payments for results. The additional skill required would promote a change in mindset and encourage competitiveness motivating farmers to try harder. It would also help their image because they can show that they are delivering results. However, it would take work to reach a consensus on objectives. Farmers were open to self-assessment with appropriate training, including peer review. Flexibility and simplicity were very important with current approaches perceived to be overly rigid and punitive. Farmers stressed it also had to make sense for their farm business given viability pressures. Measures that could successfully marry food production with biodiversity and carbon benefits were key, for example, well-managed hedgerows.</p>	
Keywords	Agri-environment schemes, results-based schemes, environmental land management, agricultural policy
JEL Code	Q18, Q24, Q58
Introduction	<i>100 – 250 words</i>
<p>Results-based agri-environment schemes (RB-AES), which reward farmers for environmental performance, are attracting growing interest as an alternative to traditional action-based schemes that require farmers to follow set prescriptions. For example, an action-based scheme may require a hedge to contain a minimum of five woody species, which when inspected is recorded as a pass or a non-compliance/fail. In contrast, the results-based approach scores the ecological quality of a hedge. Points are awarded for number of woody species, height/width of the hedge, diversity of insect life or nests present, with payment dependent on the overall score. Thus, the objective is not to plant five species, but to maximise the biodiversity value of the hedgerow and therefore their payments.</p> <p>Studies have found that results-based approaches have multiple advantages as they incentivise farmers to apply skill and ingenuity to maximise payments, to grow in their appreciation of nature and may be amenable to self-assessment. They also offer</p>	

greater flexibility enabling the farmer to take better account of farm-specific features. RB-AES encourage a change in mindset with the focus on achieving environmental objectives rather than following rules. Given these benefits, these schemes are increasingly being viewed as the cost-effective option and the future of AES.

This paper reports on a small, in-depth survey of farmers and other key stakeholders exploring attitudes to the potential introduction of RB-AES in Northern Ireland. The survey revealed a positive attitude to this approach, but supporting farmers to overcome the wider challenges they face is essential to ensure success.

Methodology

100 – 250 words

Between September and December 2022, fifteen in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews were carried out with farmers and other key stakeholders. Average interview length was 1hr and 24 minutes.

Respondents included:

- Ten farmers, some of whom were farmer representatives, including cattle, sheep, dairy and vegetable, ranging from extensive, organic to very intensive farming
- Two biodiversity experts with practical experience of AES including scheme development
- Two representatives of eNGOs
- Two agricultural inspectors to glean their views on the AES inspection process (single interview)

The purpose of the survey was to provide insights on attitudes towards RB-AES from a range of perspectives. Farmers were asked about their own farm, involvement in previous AES, the local farming community, the need for training, incentives and barriers to joining an AES, issues of trust and the image of farming. They were then asked several questions specifically focused on RB-AES including knowledge and general attitudes towards these schemes, views on self-assessment and the use of app technology for recording indicators and uploading evidence, the potential role of intermediaries (e.g. eNGOs), the use of scorecards, the selection of indicators, and their willingness to work with other farmers in group schemes. Other stakeholders were asked similar questions with a greater focus on indicator selection and scorecard development given their experience of scheme development.

All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcriptions were then analysed by dominant themes.

Results

–

- Past/current AES are viewed as overly prescriptive, lacking in flexibility and sometimes punitive.



- The need for farms to be viable means that farmers cannot consider environmental schemes in isolation. RB-AES must make financial sense.
- Farmers are aware of the challenges of meeting net zero and see RB-AES as an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the environment. Focusing on measures that tie climate change, biodiversity and food production together would be key.
- Both farmers and stakeholders were positive towards RB-AES, whilst recognising that additional skills and training would be required.
- The ‘tidy farm’ mentality that insists on excessive trimming/mowing limits biodiversity benefits on farms.
- RB-AES could encourage competitiveness between farmers motivating them to try harder.
- Farmers saw RB-AES as an opportunity to help their image as they can demonstrate how they are benefit nature/biodiversity/environment.
- Work is needed to reach a consensus on the objectives underlying farmer payments.
- Indicators suggested by farmers included hedge height and width, number of species and the presence of nests. For a pastures system/mixed forestry, points could be awarded for number and species of trees, multi-species swards and different native breeds of cattle.
- Scorecards should be easy for farmers to follow and should be developed as farmers gain more knowledge.
- Farmers were open to self-assessment including use of app technology to upload evidence but training essential with farmer feedback incorporated.
- Farmers open to group scheme that enhance ecological connectivity but strong facilitator is important.

Discussion and Conclusion

100 – 250 words

The goal of this study was to provide insights for policymakers on attitudes, barriers/solutions to the potential introduction of RB-AES in Northern Ireland. The survey indicates a positive attitude towards RB-AES with these schemes encouraging a mindset shift in favour of the environment by motivating farmer skill, knowledge and ingenuity. However, they must recognise the need for the farm business to be viable, balancing farm profitability, food production, biodiversity and carbon storage. Environmental work needs to be valued more highly with payments that adequately compensate farmers for space given to nature. Long-term, stable, and viable payments make this possible.

Raising awareness among farmers of the benefits of pro-environmental actions is important, for example, high and wide hedges for biodiversity to counteract the strong ‘tidy farm’ mentality that exists. Farmers are often unaware of the extent of biodiversity decline or water quality issues in their own catchment.

Farmers recognise that managing land for environmental outcomes requires a different set of skills and knowledge so they see training as essential. Other studies have shown that ecological benefits are greater with appropriate training as it can fill knowledge gaps, help farmers develop a range of management skills, improve confidence and encourage a more professionalised approach to agri-environmental management. Moreover, group training events facilitate enhanced knowledge and experience sharing between farmers, which in turn may increase willingness to participate in group schemes.

Continuous engagement with farmers is essential to understand and overcome the challenges they face and to encourage them to deliver for the environment.