



Living & Working  
**Farming & Agricultural Land Management**

## 5. Policy Framework - Farming & Agricultural Land Management

### 5.7 Farming & Agricultural Land Management

#### Background

5.7.1 Farming has been shaping the Dorset countryside for thousands of years and the landscape we have now is largely a result of agricultural activity. Approximately 85% of the AONB is in active agricultural management. As such, farming activity continues to have a huge impact on the landscape and wildlife of the AONB.



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5.7.2 For the last 27 years, farming practices have been largely driven by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which provides agricultural support to farmers in EU member states. Until now, these subsidies have been linked to production and this mechanism played a key role in securing the food supply. Farming practice has also become both more intensive and more specialised. Whilst food production has increased dramatically, this intensification has affected the AONB environment.

5.7.3 However, recent reforms to CAP have been agreed that will decouple subsidies from production. A greater emphasis will be placed on environmental and socio-economic concerns. CAP reform therefore presents important changes and potential opportunities for the management and quality of the AONB environment.

5.7.4 Farming is in a particularly difficult period. In addition to structural changes associated with reform of the CAP, the last 10 year period in the UK has included the BSE disease outbreak, the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak and, in recent years, trading difficulties arising from a 'strong pound' and the relatively high price of UK agricultural products abroad. Within the Dorset AONB the viability of the dairy sector has been particularly vulnerable with the number of dairy holdings in the AONB declining by 34% between 1990 and 2002. Similarly the number of holdings of beef cattle in the AONB has declined by 21% with other elements of the livestock sector also showing reductions.

5.7.5 The majority of land in the AONB is grade 3 (Agricultural Land Classification scale 1-5). A

small amount of grade 1 land exists near Bridport, while in the east of the AONB the poor sandy soils are mostly classified as grade 4. This constrains the diversity of agricultural options by comparison to adjoining counties, which have higher proportions of higher grade land.

5.7.6 Some of the most beautiful areas of the Dorset AONB are often the most difficult to farm profitably. Whilst some aggregation of such areas into larger arable units that can utilise an economy of scale will continue to occur, many farmers will be increasingly dependent on lower profit enterprises. The difficult times experienced by the livestock sector could have a significant impact on the AONB landscape. Within the AONB the notable livestock areas include the Marshwood, Powerstock and Blackmore Vales.



Notable livestock areas include the Marshwood and Blackmore Vales.

5.7.7 The Dorset AONB remains an attractive rural area. Fewer people are now employed in the agricultural industry (the number of employees within agriculture in the AONB declined by 32% in the period between 1990 and 2002), yet it continues to provide a cornerstone for many traditional, cultural and social aspects of rural life.

5.7.8 The strategic importance of food production has now to be considered as an integral part of sustainable land management. Farmers, who manage much of the land for food production, have, therefore, an increasing role to play in managing the quality of the landscape and environment. They are increasingly required to meet new demands at a time when financial returns are declining and issues such as BSE, Foot and Mouth and the debate regarding genetically modified crops have dented public confidence in the industry.

5.7.9 In summer 2002, the Government initiated a dialogue on issues regarding genetically modified crops. This has included three inter-linked strands of work:

- a public debate ("GM Nation?")
- a review of the scientific issues
- a study into the overall costs and benefits of GM crops

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The results of these studies will be taken into account by the Government in developing policy on GM crops and whether they are grown commercially in the UK. As such, the GM status of the AONB will be determined at National level. Should the Government approve the commercial growing of GM crops, it will be up to individual landowners in the AONB to decide whether or not they will be grown.

### Current Trends

5.7.10 Dorset's downland was once famous for the number of sheep it supported, but has largely been converted to arable. Livestock farming is decreasing throughout the AONB and continues to be a weak economic sector.

5.7.11 There is currently an increase in the number of smaller farm units, 'hobby' farming and land purchase for amenity. There has also been an increase in size of some larger holdings. These farm structure changes have direct management implications for the Dorset AONB.

5.7.12 The role of farming is changing to encompass wider land management, access and tourism.

5.7.13 Many farmers are diversifying to incorporate tourism and other rural based industries and working off farm to add income.

5.7.14 Farm incomes are decreasing while land values remain high, restricting the recruitment of new entrants into the industry.

### Key Issues

5.7.15 The key issues affecting farming and agriculture in the Dorset AONB include:

- Producers of commodities are reliant on decisions made at an international level.
- Influence of supermarkets on production and pricing.
- Impact on landscape and wildlife of intensive farming practices.
- Reduced viability of family farming.
- Decline in the livestock sector.
- Decline in skills within the industry.
- Insufficient opportunities for new entrants in to farming.
- Insufficient recognition and support for wider countryside management.
- Poor public understanding and confidence.

- Quality assurance schemes are poorly explained.
- Need for greater co-ordination and integration of advice and support for farmers.
- Deterioration and inappropriate use of farm buildings and land.
- Limited local processing facilities reduce opportunities for local branding schemes.
- Lack of agreed strategy for bio-energy production and assessment of benefits and dis-benefits of potential energy crops.
- Concern and ongoing debate about 'genetically modified' (GM) crops.

### Key Opportunities

5.7.16 The key opportunities for farming and agriculture in the AONB include:

- Additional money to be made available for management of the environment through CAP reform. The new agri-environment schemes, to be launched in 2005, will provide greater opportunities and incentives to manage the environment sensitively.
- Organic farming generally has the support and confidence of the public and can provide opportunities for some farmers.
- Local food marketing provides a real opportunity for both locals and visitors to support the local economy and improve people's link with farming.
- Renewable energy and bio-fuel production may offer a real boost to the industry and help achieve sustainability targets.
- Increasing interest in smallholdings and part time farming offers opportunities for maintaining skills and diversity of local produce.



There is increasing interest in local farm produce.

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### Current Activity

5.7.17 There are many initiatives related to farming underway in the AONB, including:

- **Agri-environment Schemes.** DEFRA currently operate and administer the Countryside Stewardship and the South Wessex Downs 'Environmentally Sensitive Area' (ESA) Schemes in Dorset. Both offer incentive payments to farmers for work to improve the environment. These programmes are currently under review and it is intended that they will be merged into a single two-tier programme (Entry Level and Higher Tier Scheme) in the coming years.
- **Advisory Services.** These include the Dorset Agricultural Advisory Service, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, the Purbeck Biodiversity Project, the Dorset Wildlife Trust who offer advice to owners of county wildlife sites, Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), Organic Advisory Service.
- **Innovative approaches to addressing issues.** There are good examples of innovative thinking emerging to address issues of agriculture sustainability and environmental protection.
- **Regional Renewables Strategy.** A strategy for renewable energy production in the South West Region is being produced by the SWRA in conjunction with the SWRDA and GOSW.
- **Local Produce Schemes.** These are schemes to support and market local produce and include Dorset Foodlinks, Taste of the West, Direct from Dorset and Purbeck Products Limited.

### Related Policies and Strategies

5.7.18 Agricultural policies and strategies include:

- 'Common Agricultural Policy' (and reforms) - European Union treaty articles 32-38
- 'Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food: Facing the Future' (DEFRA, 2002)
- 'Our Countryside; The Future - A Fair Deal for Rural England' (Government White Paper, ODPM, 2000)
- 'England Rural Development Programme 2000-2006 (South West Region)' (MAFF, 2000)
- CA145, *Quality of life in Tomorrows Countryside: Implementing the Countryside Agency's Strategy* (Countryside Agency, 2003)
- Hedgerow Regulations, 1997
- 'Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations' (DEFRA regulation from February 2002)

### 5.7.19 Dorset AONB Policy Framework - Farming & Agricultural Land Management

#### Policy Aims

- Ensure that farming can help provide a beautiful and healthy landscape and environment.
- Ensure that farming continues to contribute to rural viability and way of life.
- Ensure that food production is valued for quality and contribution to healthy lifestyles, local distinctiveness and the local economy.
- Seek opportunities to meet local needs and support local enterprise from the agricultural policy framework and the 'Sustainable Food and Farming Strategy'.

#### Policy Objectives

- F1. Provide integrated information and advice to land managers on landscape character and quality, biodiversity, heritage and natural resource management and thereby influence agri - environment schemes.
- F2. Support and promote the whole farm planning approach as a means of integrating and adding value to management of farmland.
- F3. Support and promote initiatives to maintain a sustainable high quality livestock sector.
- F4. Promote sustainable food production and its role in maintaining local distinctiveness and a high quality environment. In particular, support local food processing capacity and collaborative schemes to address deficiency in abattoir, cutting, packaging and local marketing.
- F5. Develop farming and agricultural skills network in order to maintain and enhance land management and business skills.
- F6. Increase understanding of changes in industry structure and support the needs of smaller farming enterprises such as smallholdings, share farming, part time and contract farming.
- F7. Promote a better understanding between those that manage the land and those that use and enjoy it.
- F8. Raise understanding of food production and help maintain and promote the links between farming and agriculture and the wider community.
- F9. Support and promote appropriate diversification opportunities.
- F10. Identify opportunities for sustainable energy production from farmland and implications for natural beauty.
- F11. Encourage a decrease in the volume of waste materials produced on farms that are not recycled, e.g. plastic sheeting, rubber car tyres, old machinery etc.