

Dartmoor Farming in Protected Landscapes

Local Assessment Panel

Wednesday 20th December 2023, 12:00am, Parke.

Attending:

Russell Ashford, Layland Branfield, Dan Alford, Sarah Blyth, Alison Clish-Green, Shirley Mudge, James Sharpe, Peter Harper (*Peter left the meeting after the Nofence collar discussion*), Eamon Crowe & Laurie Phippen from Natural England (*Eamon and Laurie were allowed one vote between them on behalf of Natural England*).

Dartmoor staff attending:

Simon Pryor, Rachel Cooper, Bea Dunscombe

Apologies:

Christine Malseed, John Howell, Will Dracup

Applications over 10k

Heatree

Presented by Simon Pryor

Summary of application:

To improve the management and increase the biodiversity in the rhos pasture and to restore semi-natural grassland fields to a traditional organic hay meadow.

Declarations of interest:

None.

Discussion points:

- The Panel asked what the flail would be used for, and whether it was justified. It was confirmed that it will be used for controlling rush in the wet pasture, stopping the willow spreading into the lower meadows and clearing pathways through the hay meadows to provide better access for children so that they can get out onto the farmland.
- There was concern over the cost of the hay meadow work, was this considered expensive for 10 ha of hay meadow? It was explained that all the payments are based on the CS rate.
- It was suggested that the applicant's grazier could be funded for their time seeing as they will be providing land management advice. It was confirmed that this was explored, but it was in the grazier's interest to have their cattle on the applicant's land in exchange for their organic hay produce. There is already a mutually beneficial agreement in place.
- The Panel questioned why the applicant hasn't investigated a CS agreement. It was confirmed that they would like to make use of FiPL to embed changes in their management,

and will look to go into CS+ when it is clearer what options there are, and they have a better understanding of what might be possible after these initial improvements have been made.

- The Panel asked whether this farm would become organic certified? Organic hay needs to come from an organic certified farm. Therefore, we need to make sure that the grazier’s organic status isn’t being jeopardised by using the applicant’s hay for their cattle. It was confirmed that the FiPL team will check this asap.
- It was requested that when the applicant claims for CS items, they must be completed to CS standards & specifications.
- It was emphasised that the applicant must produce a hay meadow, and not an area of scrub – the Panel are supporting the outcome and this is their expectation.
- There was a query about wildflower seed. It was explained that the applicant may use some green hay, but ultimately our role is to advise on the outcomes that we expect, and it’s up to the applicant how they achieve this.

Scoring:

The scoring recommended by the FiPL team was confirmed:

	Score	Score after weighting
Project outcomes (Climate, Nature, People and Place) – 40%	8	3.2
Ability to deliver - 20%	8	1.6
Sustainability / legacy of projects - 20%	8	1.6
Value for Money - 20%	8	1.6
Total	32	8

Decision:

Condition(s):

- The FiPL team to check that the grazier’s organic status isn’t being jeopardised by using the applicant’s hay for their cattle during this ‘conversion’ phase.

For: 7

Against: 0

Abstained: 2

To approve this project subject to meeting the above condition.

Pipeline projects

A. Avon Valley Rhododendrons

Simon Pryor reminded the Panel of the scope and ambition of this proposal, which is to eradicate Rhododendron from the Avon valley above Shipley Bridge. He also summarised all the work that has been done by the applicant since July, and the views and support expressed by other parties. This included more information on the techniques to be used, the extent of the Rhododendron, likely costs, archaeology and offers of funding.

- The Panel requested clarification around the timeline for this project, as we are at the end of 2023. It was confirmed that the FiPL team will confirm this in the new year and see how much work it might be possible to complete ahead of March.
- Clarification was also requested around the timing of South West Water's £20k contribution. This will be explored but will most likely be matched to the work included in each phase of the project.
- Query about the signatory, who would receive payment? It was confirmed that this would be South West Lakes Trust, and grant would be paid directly to them, and distributed appropriately. They would be responsible for engaging contractors, to work on the various land holdings.
- It was emphasised that this project needs to be collaborative and would need written support from all landowners involved. It was clarified that the Secretary of the Commons Association expressed their support, but the Panel felt it would be best if the commoners could meet in person to discuss this and agree on the plans.
- There was a question about what would replace the Rhododendron and the Panel were concerned to ensure that gorse and bracken don't replace the Rhododendron. It was explained that the intention is to restore the land to its previous condition and vegetation, which will be a mix of heath, upland pasture, wet meadow on the valley floor and scattered trees on the steeper slopes.
- Evidence of three quotes may be required ahead of deciding on which level the CS rates will be paid.
- The Panel provided the following advice based on their experience of eradicating rhododendrons:
 - Don't attempt to dig up the rhododendrons, cutting and spraying them is the only efficient way of their removal. But the contractor will need to spray herbicide on the day that they are cut.
 - Anything left of the ground will regenerate, so everything that is cut needs to be cleared.
 - Care will have to be taken if the material is composted or chipped and used, and it can be toxic to plants.
- It was suggested that we organise three test plots of rhododendron clearance as a trial phase before making a decision on supporting the full project. This would ideally include three contractors on three test plots, and these plots can be compared for effectiveness and cost. We could then learn something about how we clear this invasive species (in a Dartmoor specific context) and would be a good example of test funding. It would also build confidence with landowners, local people and visitors as we could show them what the work will look like on the ground.
- It was suggested that this project is capped to avoid it using up a large amount of our budget.
- It was suggested that the applicants assess the possible impact on the river. It can be very toxic and could impact water quality and river fauna.
- Planting on the slopes either side of the valley will be needed to replace the woodland cover, and this will need to be a pioneer species that will establish quickly on a steep, rocky slope.
- *The Panel confirmed their advice:* to investigate a test phase as a trial of three clearance plots using different techniques. As well as a commitment to restore vegetation and plant trees in the areas that are cleared. The Panel would support this initial trial phase to see

regenerative activity and learn about eradication methods. This will provide information and experience to underpin a bigger project in the future, but we need to tread carefully, learn something from this test and help the applicant to build up some baseline data before a bigger project is approved.

All in favour of this advice.

B. Coombe Court Sheep Dairy

- The Panel asked how much the applicant is going to charge per litre of sheep milk, and whether they will generate enough income. It was suggested that they could explore ice cream in addition to cheese. And if not, would we fund a project that might not generate sufficient income for their farm? We need to ensure legacy.
- The Panel provided the names of some contacts who might be able to advise in this area. The FiPL team will follow up with these.
- It was emphasised that the applicant will need to make sure that they know what they're doing – health and safety, business plan etc.
- *The Panel confirmed their advice:* the applicant should reach out to the contacts that they suggested in the first instance, this project is something that the Panel would be keen to support in the future once the applicant has more concrete plans.

All in favour of this advice.

C. Meavy Barton Farm and Bidder's Butcher's Shop

- It was suggested that we could explore Defra's small abattoir fund, as this could be a funding option.
- It was advised that this would need to be submitted in two applications, and not as a joint application. The farm and butcher's shop appear to be different entities, and it would be helpful if they could be formally considered in the same meeting, or projects developed sufficiently well to reference the link between them when one is presented.
- The Panel also suggested that two different intervention rates might need to be used per project, but this collaboration certainly enhances the application.
- The main concern was that planning permission will be required for the farm building, and therefore the butcher's shop might be up and running much sooner.
- The Panel requested a structural survey for the butcher's shop, the FiPL team confirmed that they will investigate this. The applicant will also need to adhere to building regulations.
- We need to be clear that this is an educational project, and we should focus primarily on this element.
- *The Panel confirmed their advice:* the applicant should obtain quotes in the first instance, and then they would be happy to provide more advice based on their costings.

All in favour of this advice.

Discussion

A. Nofence collars

- The FiPL team reviewed their stance in relation to Nofence applications, we need to be careful of the precedent that we've already set with Nofence projects.
- It was suggested that the FiPL team get in touch with Epping Forest – who have carried out considerable work in relation to public access/stock management with Nofence collars.

- The FiPL team need to gain more information from other PLs so that we know what other teams are doing.
- Question about whether we need to install QR codes for Nofence going forward, so that public know about the collars on the moor?
- It was confirmed that we are still in the trial phase with collars, we can fund at 80% if there is evidenced significant additional benefit, and learnings are gathered.

B. Great Gnats Head

Declarations of interest:

Members of the Panel flagged that they know the grazier involved in this application because they are a farmer on Dartmoor. However, no-one had any commercial or direct interest so it was decided that this would not need to be declared as a conflict of interest.

- The FiPL team confirmed that we have a good baseline survey of the site (within the last 12 months).
- The Panel were concerned about the precedent being set with this application, what happens with future Nofence/peat restoration projects?
- The owner of the collars needs to maintain them for 5 years, beyond FiPL ending. We need assurance of this.
- If there is interest from other graziers to use collars, then the National Trust would need to fund the same for other graziers who were interested in doing this work on NT land. It was confirmed that NT have agreed to this. We need to be fair and consistent.
- This project all depends on whether the management of this area is successful. We can't control what other cattle do. When you exclude cattle, others will go in there. This is therefore not a long-term solution.
- It was agreed that Nofence is a good use of FiPL money, but it is too complicated in this instance.
- Should the commons association pay for some of this work? The applicant is being paid to manage his cattle on this common.
- The Panel questioned whether SW Peatland Partnership should purchase the collars?
- After a long discussion it was concluded that this project scores too low on deliverability and legacy. There was concern over applicant buy in, as well as collaboration with other graziers.

The Panel decided not to approve funding due to concern over deliverability of the outcomes sought by the project. We need a clearer understanding of how other stock will be managed once Mr Coles' cattle are excluded from the peatland restoration area, the panel felt confidence in the project can only be achieved by a more collaborative approach with input from other graziers in the project area. There was additional concern that other peatland restoration projects had not excluded cattle and over the timescale required for exclusion.

For: 9

Against: 0

Abstained: 0

All support this decision.

AOBs:

- The FiPL team shared figures from 2023, showing the high number of enquiries and applications handled by the team and number of grants awarded.
- The FiPL team should look at projects in the pipeline (machinery in particular) that could be bought forward to 2023-24 to ensure full allocation of our grant funding before end of March.
- Confirmed the date of our next meeting in January.

Date of next LAP meeting: January 31st, 11am, Ullacombe Farm Barn