



NPA/23/012

Dartmoor National Park Authority

14 April 2023

Agri-environment agreement rollovers on Dartmoor

Report of the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) and Head of Conservation and Land Management

Recommendation: **That Members note the current position regarding agri-environment agreement rollovers on Dartmoor and offer any comments.**

1 Agri-environment Schemes

- 1.1 Agri-environment schemes (AES) are Government programmes set up to help farmers manage their land in an environmentally friendly way. They provide funding by paying for income foregone and costs incurred to maintain and improve largely biodiversity assets but also other public goods to a lesser degree. These schemes alongside the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) which rewards farmers for keeping land in good agricultural condition are considered vital in the uplands to help retain viable farm businesses. BPS is currently being withdrawn over a seven-year period and will not be replaced, whilst current AES are due to be replaced by a new Environmental Land Management programme in 2024.
- 1.2 Existing AES are either Environment Stewardship (ES) or Countryside Stewardship (CS) and each agreement lasts between five and ten years. AES is funded by Defra and administered by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) with technical and advisory support from Natural England (NE), who are also responsible for ensuring that Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are achieving favourable condition.
- 1.3 As noted above, the current AES are to be phased out and replaced with Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS) from 2024. To facilitate the transition from the existing schemes to the new ELMS, the RPA are currently offering those with expiring agreements the chance to either extend their ES scheme or transition to CS.
- 1.4 The National Park Authority has no formal role in the administration of current agri-environment schemes. Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL), which is administered by the National Park Authority, is a funding programme that offers grants and agreements for projects. FiPL does not offer five or ten year agreements. The focus of FiPL is broader than traditional AES – it can offer grant

funding that combines environment and economy under one or more of four themes: People, Place, Nature and Climate.

2 SSSI Condition

- 2.1 The condition of many Dartmoor SSSIs has remained poor or static for many years. The reasons for this are complex and not restricted to Dartmoor, many National Parks are in a similar state. The Authority has no formal role in the notification, monitoring or management of SSSIs (except for where it owns land that has been notified as a SSSI). Significant cuts to NE budgets in the last decade have made it challenging for them to retain a strong consistent advisory presence in many areas or allow for a regular monitoring protocol for designated sites. NE have however renewed their focus on SSSI condition in the last 2-3 years as the RPA have adopted responsibility for other elements of AESs that traditionally fell to NE.
- 2.2 With the advent of rollovers, NE have attempted to improve SSSI condition by recommending winter grazing reductions at a scale that many farmers considered excessive and too swift. Questions were asked about the evidence supporting reductions that might lead to SSSI favourable conditions. Local MPs were contacted citing concerns around future farm business viability. Sir Geoffrey Cox MP chaired a debate on the 'Condition of Dartmoor' in May 2022. The Chief Executive of Natural England spoke at this event as did the Chief Executive (National Park Officer). Subsequent to this meeting the Authority convened a working group to identify a way forward. The group included representatives from: Dartmoor Commoners' Council, Dartmoor Commons Owners' Association, Duchy of Cornwall, Natural England and National Farmers Union. The group proposed the appointment of an independent facilitator to identify the issues and develop an action plan that was based on engagement and consensus.

3 Agri-environment agreement rollovers

- 3.1 Defra introduced a 'rollover' process for all expiring HLS schemes as a means to extend agreements until ELMS is introduced. This guarantees ongoing delivery of objectives and income to farmers without entering a new agreement for protracted periods, allowing for seamless transition to the new schemes when launched. Extensions have historically been for one year with the expectation of continuation if objectives were met. After two years of annual extensions, Defra and the RPA are now offering a five-year extension to agreements that are due to expire over the next year. On Dartmoor this equates to 23 agreements mostly associated with commons. NE recommend that any required changes can be phased over the five year period providing time for agreement holders to adapt their business.
- 3.2 Letters were sent in February/March to relevant agreement holders by the RPA outlining the offer and requesting a response within 15 working days. NE have contacted all commons associations with expiring agreements outlining principles which would underpin their (NE's) approach to supporting an agreement extension. The principles included:
 - A focus on summer grazing.

- Overall stocking rates in agreements to align with established (evidence-based) rates for restoration or maintenance of key habitats present and on SSSIs the achievement of favourable condition.
- Winter grazing (except by ponies) will need to be justified by clear and specific environmental outcomes that require winter stocking. If there is a case for winter grazing then this will only be supported where it has been established that there will not be detrimental impacts on key habitats (such as heath, blanket bog, mire) or species.
- Agreements extensions will be set up with clear milestones for any stocking adjustments that are required.
- Ensure management actions are sympathetic to and compatible with reinstating full hydrological function of the peatland (if applicable) where this is currently not present.

3.3 The communication indicated that NE would offer annual review meetings with agreement holders to discuss progress of each agreement towards the agreed outcomes and that NE staff would be in touch to discuss with agreement holders the specifics of the agreement. To secure an extension a management plan must be produced detailing any required changes to stocking rates.

3.4 Following this initial communication more detailed information on stocking rates was sent to two commons. This was requested by the commoners as they wanted more detail on what they needed to do to secure an extension to their agri-environment agreement. This correspondence indicated (for one of the commons) a potential 80% reduction in stock numbers across the year compared to current rates. NE have subsequently indicated to the agreement holders that these were initial figures and will be revised particularly with respect to summer grazing to address the over dominance of Molinia.

3.5 The Authority was not consulted in advance of the communication from Natural England. The communication from NE coupled with indicative grazing figures (both generic and specific to one common) have resulted in considerable alarm, worry and stress amongst the farming community. It has led to commoners across all commons speculating that they are facing up to 80% stock reductions if they wish to remain in an agri-environment agreement. This level of stock reduction could have a significant impact on farm businesses (especially tenants) and could have an impact on the type of stock that grazes the common. Agri-environment payments are now more important given the reductions in BPS.

4 Role of the National Park Authority

4.1 As noted above, the Authority has no formal role in the administration of agri-environment agreements. Nevertheless, these agreements are an important tool to help deliver National Park purposes, sustain farm businesses and contribute to the local economy. It is estimated that the current value of agri-environment agreements on Dartmoor is £4-5m per annum.

4.2 The Authority's position is as outlined in the [Dartmoor Partnership Plan](#). This statutory document was produced following a process of consultation and engagement. The vision for Dartmoor is clear about farming (and forestry) businesses playing a key role in delivering a high-quality environment and local

products, alongside a range of other public benefits. The challenge identified in the Plan is to ensure future farming practice is economically viable, helping to protect and manage Dartmoor's special qualities and contributing positively to nature enhancement and the climate crisis.

- 4.3 We have been working to try and bring clarity to the position outlined by NE with regard to rollovers and stocking levels. From discussions with NE officials, it is our understanding that there may be greater flexibility than is being currently communicated. We are concerned that there is a very narrow focus on stocking levels; we know that this is just one factor in a complicated picture of inter-relationships and inter-dependencies.
- 4.4 We have suggested to NE that all agri-environment agreements that have already ended or are due to end in the next few months should be extended by 12 months with the potential for four-year extensions at the end of the 12 months. This would provide time for the preparation of management plans which should be on the basis of 'adaptive management' (a process of true engagement; phased changes that are monitored and assessed to determine any need for further changes; and, an integrated approach that considers nature, culture, access etc. alongside the viability of farm businesses).
- 4.5 Building on the discussions of the working group established following the meeting held in May 2022 and chaired by Sir Geoffrey Cox, we have also suggested an independent review to look at all of the issues and identify a way forward with an associated action plan. We wrote to the Chair of Dartmoor Commoners' Council on 23 March 2023 outlining our position (see appendix 1).
- 4.6 We have briefed Sir Geoffrey Cox MP on our position and made suggestions for a way forward. He has been liaising with the other Dartmoor MPs. Sir Geoffrey Cox, Sir Gary Streeter and Anthony Mangnall issued a joint press release on 24 March 2023 calling for an independent inquiry (see appendix 2).
- 4.7 The Authority hosted and chaired a meeting of key stakeholders (Dartmoor Commoners' Council, Dartmoor Common Owners' Association, Duchy of Cornwall, Rural Payments Agency, Natural England, Historic England, Dartmoor Hill Farm Project and Farm Community Network). There was agreement from all present on the need for an independent review. To facilitate this there needs to be time for the review to be completed before any significant changes are made to current agri-environment agreements. This suggests a need for an extension of 12 months with the potential for a further 4 years. NE and the Rural Payments Agency agreed to look at the '1 plus 4 model' but there are issues associated with this, including that a 4 year extension in 2024 can not currently be guaranteed and questions around how this fits with SSSI consent and Habitat Regulations Assessment. Subsequent to the meeting, the view of NE and RPA is that there is a need to urgently halt further deterioration to SSSI condition alongside a 1+4 approach which in their view would best be achieved through a 5-year extension with year 1 to allow for an independent review of the current impact of stock management on SSSI condition and determine stocking levels and an adaptive management approach for years 2-4 which deliver a trajectory towards SSSI favourable condition

- 4.8 There was also agreement at this meeting that NE would provide further information on a common by common basis of what they think needs to happen to agreements – a potential traffic light system.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 The Authority has no statutory role in current agri-environment agreements but has worked with key stakeholders in the last few weeks (and before) to try and identify a practical way forward.
- 5.2 Agri-environment agreements are an important tool to deliver National Park purposes, support viable farm businesses and contribute to the wider rural economy. It is clear that the current system is not working as effectively as it needs to and lessons need to be learnt. Projects like Dartmoor Farming Futures, the Environmental Land Management Test and Trials and Farming in Protected Landscapes provide useful evidence for the way ahead: an approach that empowers and involves farmers to deliver public goods (e.g. enhanced nature) as well as food and fibre production, using their local knowledge and skills.
- 5.3 We hope that our suggestions for an extension to current and recently expired agreements will provide time for an independent review. We will work with stakeholders to try and facilitate this.

KEVIN BISHOP AND CHRIS GILES

Attachments:

Appendix 1 – Copy of letter from the Chief Executive (National Park Officer) to Chair, Dartmoor Commoners' Council, dated 23 March 2023

Appendix 2 - Copy of press release issued by Sir Geoffrey Cox MP, Sir Gary Streeter MP and Anthony Mangnall MP dated 24 March 2023



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Mr P French
Corringdon Farm

Please Quote: KB/PB
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23 March 2023

Dear Philip

I understand that there is some confusion about the Authority's role and position regarding the situation concerning potential extensions to Higher Level Stewardship agreements. For this reason I thought it would be helpful if I set out the National Park Authority's position.

The National Park Authority has no formal role in the administration of Higher Level Stewardship or Countryside Stewardship. The schemes are administered by the Rural Payments Agency with Natural England as statutory advisers. We had no advance warning or insight into the email communications from Natural England to commons associations concerning rollovers.

The Authority's position is as outlined in the [Dartmoor Partnership Plan](#). This document was produced following a process of consultation and engagement. The vision for Dartmoor is clear about farming (and forestry) businesses playing a key role in delivering a high-quality environment and local products, alongside a range of other public benefits. The challenge identified in the Plan is to ensure future farming and forestry practice is economically viable, helping to protect and manage Dartmoor's special qualities and contributing positively to nature enhancement and the climate crisis.

We have been working to try and bring clarity to the position outlined by Natural England with regard to rollovers and stocking levels. We have organised and will host the meeting on 4 April 2022 involving you as Chair of the Commoners' Council, the Commons Owners' Association, National Farmers' Union and Natural England.

There appears to be considerable uncertainty over what Natural England may be requiring, over what time-line, on which commons and with what impact. There is a narrow focus on stocking levels but we know that this is just one factor in a complicated picture of inter-relationships and inter-dependencies. From discussions with Natural England officials, it is our understanding that there may be greater flexibility than is currently being communicated.

We have suggested to Natural England that all existing HLS agreements should be extended by 12 months with the potential for four-year extensions at the end of the 12 months. This would provide time for the preparation of management plans which should be on the basis of 'adaptive management' (a process of true engagement; changes monitored and assessed to

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Pamela Woods Chair Kevin Bishop PhD Chief Executive (National Park Officer)

The purposes of the Dartmoor National Park Authority are to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the area's special qualities.

In pursuing these purposes the Authority has a duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of the local community.

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determine any need for further changes, and an integrated approach that considers nature, culture, access etc., alongside the viability of farm businesses). I understand that Natural England had originally favoured this option but were told by the Rural Payments Agency that 12 month extensions would only be permitted in exceptional circumstances. We have discussed the option of a 12 month extension with Sir Geoffrey Cox.

We have also suggested an independent review to look at all of the issues and identify a way forward with an associated action plan. This would build on the ideas that we discussed following the meeting chaired by Sir Geoffrey Cox at Two Bridges Hotel last May which we thought had universal support from all of the key players. I understand that Natural England would support this approach.

As I said at the Two Bridges event last May, we recognise that the future for farming businesses on Dartmoor is uncertain; you face the immediacy of reducing income from the Basic Payment Scheme but little clarity on the new Environmental Land Management schemes or future trading arrangements. The official report that led to the designation of Dartmoor as a National Park spoke about the importance of “treading hoof and browsing tooth”. They remain important, if not essential for the future, but the challenge is the right hoofs and teeth in the right places and numbers at the right times and to achieve that you also need the right farmers in the right places at the right times.

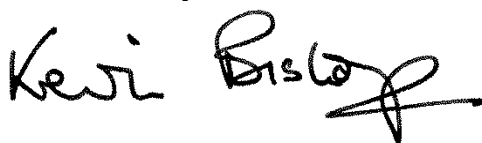
The Authority has worked in partnership to secure and champion initiatives like Farming Futures, Farming in Protected Landscapes and the Environmental Land Management Test and Trials. The lessons from these projects provide useful evidence for the way ahead: an approach that empowers and involves farmers to deliver public goods (e.g. enhanced nature) as well as food and fibre production.

In summary, we are:

- calling for a 12 month extension to current Higher Level Stewardship agreements;
- proposing an independent review of the situation regarding agri-environment agreements, future of farming, food and fibre production and delivery of public benefits to inform an agreed action plan
- convening a meeting on 4 April 2023 of all key stakeholders to seek clarity on the current situation; and,
- will work with local MPs to seek their support for the actions above.

We will present a report on these issues to the Authority meeting scheduled for 14 April 2023. This is a public meeting and people can register to speak. Details of how to do this can be found on our website: www.dartmoor.gov.uk/about-us/meetings-and-committees/speaking-at-meetings.

Yours sincerely



Dr Kevin Bishop
Chief Executive (National Park Officer)

AN INDEPENDENT INQUIRY FOR DARTMOOR

Dartmoor MPs call for independent inquiry into management of the Moor.

Dartmoor MPs, The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP for Torridge and West Devon, Sir Gary Streeter MP for South West Devon and Anthony Mangnall MP for Totnes have joined in writing to the Secretary of State for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs calling on her to set up an independent process to inquire into the means of achieving a proper balance between the various competing public interests and goods in Dartmoor's complex environment. They have also held preliminary discussions with the farming minister and with DNPA.

The MPs' joint statement said:

1. "We strongly believe the only way to achieve the complex balancing of the public interests on Dartmoor, and to gain the consensus necessary, is for an independent inquiry into the way forward to take place.
2. After the Dartmoor Farming Forum organised by Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP last summer, which the Chief Executive of Natural England attended, a working group consisting of all relevant parties was set up and commenced meetings to achieve some consensus on a practical approach, reflecting the fact that Dartmoor is a complex environment in which competing public interests and goods must be balanced in a manner that promotes them all.
3. This working group developed a proposal to
 - appoint an independent facilitator paid for jointly by all partners into which all would "buy in".
 - that person would work to identify and document all of the issues by talking to all of the stakeholders (the issues include but are not limited to: how SSSIs are notified and monitored; the link between the common and home farms; the continued viability of farm businesses, how to manage stock on the commons given the pressure from visitors, dogs and, on some, the impact of military training; environmental pressures etc.)
 - they would then prepare an action plan to address the issues and a 'road map' on the way ahead.
4. Agreement from all stakeholders was achieved to this process in December 2022 and a brief was drafted by Natural England but not yet circulated to all parties for comment and agreement.
5. It seems that valuable and constructive work has now been abandoned by Natural England which has issued apparently peremptory limits on grazing, which would have a significant adverse impact on farm businesses (especially tenants), rendering some, if not many, no longer viable. It would also destroy the ancient traditional hefted flocks, which instinctively know the boundaries of their own common and are themselves a prized part of the unique life and culture of Dartmoor.

6. No consultation with any relevant authority or association charged with responsibility for the complex environment on Dartmoor, such as the Dartmoor National Park Authority, or the Dartmoor Commoners Council or the Dartmoor Owners' Association was undertaken. The communications came out of the blue. Sadly, some would say that is not uncommon of the conduct of Natural England on Dartmoor.
7. In our view, that process must be revived and include an independent examination of the ecological requirements of sensitive sites on Dartmoor and the relevance of traditional grazing to them. It is essential the process should command widespread public confidence including from all those who are responsible for the management of Dartmoor. Sadly, after recent developments, there has been a very serious deterioration of trust between the regulator and those it regulates, and we no longer believe Natural England's policy and approach to Dartmoor, left to itself, can command that confidence.
8. We have a clear proposal:
 1. A 12-month extension of all current agri-environment agreements
 2. The appointment of an independent facilitator paid for jointly by all partners and into which all "buy in".
 3. That person would work to identify and document all relevant issues and would
 4. Then prepare an action plan to address the issues and a 'road map' on the way ahead."