

# New research shows agri-environment schemes improved by training

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Tractor in a field

A research programme exploring the effectiveness and value for money of agri-environment schemes found that a relatively small amount of training for farmers could significantly improve their environmental outcome.

The project investigated two options for creating wildlife habitats that are currently available under the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme: the first aims to provide winter food for [farmland birds](#) by sowing [high energy](#) seed crops, and the second provides [pollen](#) and [nectar](#)-rich [flowering plants](#) for butterflies and bees. The research took place on 48 farms over a period of five years, with half of the participating farmers undertaking [training](#).

The research funded under the Rural Economy and Land Use

Programme involved an interdisciplinary team, with researchers from the National Environment Research Council (NERC) Centre for [Ecology & Hydrology](#) (CEH) and the Universities of Exeter and Reading. The research concluded that a relatively small investment in training, with some follow-up advice made available, could provide good value for money by enhancing the environmental outcomes.

Dr Matt Lobley, Co-Director of the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter said: “We found that agri-environment schemes do have the potential to provide good resources for bumblebees, butterflies and birds. However, not only are the experience and skills of the farmer very important in ensuring that the schemes are implemented as effectively as possible, but his or her attitude and engagement with the scheme’s objectives also play a major role in their level of success.”

The research found that the farmers who took part in a training course demonstrated a higher level of skill, and were also more positive and professional in their approach when putting the schemes into practice. They created higher quality wildlife habitats and this translated into local increases in target species of birds, butterflies and bees. The farmers also said that they enjoyed the training and found it beneficial.

Professor James Bullock from NERC Centre for Ecology & Hydrology said: “Stimulating the motivation and understanding of farmers does seem to be key to getting the most out of these agri environmental interventions. It may be that financial incentives alone are not the most effective means of getting farmers involved.

“Of course, it is vital to have the right people delivering such training. They must have the experience and skills to command the respect of the farmers who often have years of experience in managing their own land. And we also felt that the farmers’ own knowledge of the environment and the needs of local wildlife populations could be fed back much more

into policy and practice development.

“The [farmers](#) who took part in training during our research project were enthusiastic about the benefits and really enjoyed the experience. But obviously if this became a standard element in agri-environment schemes it would be necessary to consider whether training should be voluntary or mandatory. One possible option would be to include participation in training in the calculation of the points required to meet minimum stewardship thresholds. This would mean it was a voluntary option but there would be an incentive to take part.”

Provided by University of Exeter

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