

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF FLOODPLAIN MEADOWS IN ENGLAND'S LANDSCAPE RECOVERY SCHEMES

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BACKGROUND - ENGLAND'S LANDSCAPE RECOVERY SCHEMES

Landscape Recovery (LR) is one of Defra's England-wide environmental land management schemes, supporting partnership projects that aim to restore nature and deliver multiple environmental benefits at scale and over the long term. Farmers and landowners, environmental organisations and local communities co-create plans specifically tailored to their area. Projects are encouraged to be ambitious and to spread risk by combining government funding with private investment, utilising income streams such as Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) units and carbon credits.

By focusing on environmental goals, projects are intended to demonstrate that nature recovery can be economically viable and beneficial, strengthen rural communities and support local action to make space for nature alongside sustainable food production.

Landscape Recovery projects are expected to contribute to national priorities, including:

- achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050
- meeting the 2030 species abundance target and other legally binding targets covering biodiversity, water quality and tree cover
- delivering clean and plentiful water as set out in the [Plan for Water](#)
- wider commitments and objectives for nature set out in the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) and [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), including bringing protected sites into favourable condition and [protecting 30% of our land for nature](#) through the [Nature Recovery Network](#)
- the [Green Finance strategy](#), and the aim to raise at least £500 million in private finance for nature recovery every year by 2027.

The focus in Round 1 was on restoring rivers and their floodplains to a more natural state, reducing diffuse pollution, benefiting aquatic species, improving flood mitigation and resilience to climate change. 22 projects received Government funding in 2022/23 to begin the Project Development Phase, designing detailed plans to restore nature across relatively large areas. Projects are then reviewed by a panel of experts; those that are approved are offered funding to move into the Project Implementation Phase.

Round 2 focused on achieving net zero, enhancing protected sites and creating or restoring wildlife-rich habitat over at least 500 ha of land. 34 successful projects were given project development funding in 2023, with up to 2 years to create land management plans, secure consents and permits, develop monitoring and evaluation plans, undertake stakeholder engagement and secure private funding.

THE BRIEF

The Floodplain Meadows Partnership (FMP) wants to increase the impact and practical application of research on species-rich floodplain meadows and flood management through influencing activities in a number of LR projects in England. Such projects probably represent one of the best opportunities to help achieve the Partnership's ambitious goal of 74,000 ha of newly created or restored floodplain meadow. Conversely, the multifunctionality of floodplain meadow habitats can help to achieve the aims and objectives of projects involving rivers and wetlands in both Rounds.

This contract included:

- making contact with relevant LR projects from Rounds 1 and 2 to explore the extent of floodplain meadow restoration being planned or undertaken;

- exploring the potential to increase the extent of floodplain meadow restoration;
- producing contact details and a list of projects and subjects where advice and guidance would be useful and productive over the next couple of years; and
- providing a brief written summary and discussion of the findings.

METHOD

Following a trawl through Round 1 and 2 LR projects to determine which were the most relevant, a short questionnaire was devised and sent to key contacts for schemes with the potential for creating and/or restoring floodplain meadows to assist with achieving the stated objectives.

<https://forms.office.com/e/pdNenTwGJ9?origin=lpLink>

Those providing a positive response were contacted by telephone to elicit further information on how they had determined what to do and where within their project area. They were also questioned as to why they chose specific land use/land management options; whether floodplain meadows featured (now or in the past) within the catchment; what difficulties or challenges were encountered when formulating project proposals; and whether they would find further advice and guidance from FMP helpful over the next couple of years.

RESULTS

Of the 46 LR projects contacted, 19 responded, a surprisingly high percentage (41%). One project had been rejected by Defra; whilst 4 said they didn't have any floodplain meadow habitat in their project area. Other LR projects didn't respond, presumably because species-rich floodplain grasslands were not a characteristic land use.

Staff from 15 projects were interviewed and asked a series of questions. Four projects hadn't really thought about floodplain meadows as a viable and sustainable land use option but might in the future, once they have completed NVC and hydrological surveys and talked to landowners.

Ten LR projects had a definite focus on the habitat, and it would be helpful for these projects to have more access to FMP time to help project staff through training, workshops, site visits and detailed technical advice about creation, restoration, management and monitoring,

An interesting mix of **different approaches** was evident, from

- "just add water and see/work with what comes" (the wilder and wetter, adaptive management approach, including hoped-for beaver colonisation);
- those deliberately setting out to restore and expand floodplain mosaics with seasonally flooded hay meadows as a key component; and
- those who didn't really think or know about floodplain meadows and the Partnership's work (presumably because such meadows were no longer, or had never been, a prominent feature within the landscape).

Evidence of influence: One project was asked by Defra why they had not been more aspirational with respect to floodplain meadows (and wet woodland). Three projects said that the FMP technical handbook is their "go-to bible" for information on how and where to create the habitat, and how best to restore and manage such grasslands. These projects are where future input is likely to provide significant outcomes.

Changing attitudes: several project managers reported significantly increased awareness amongst the farming community of the need for greater resilience in the face of climatic change, and the value of nature-based solutions to reduce the impact of flooding/intensive rainfall events and drought (reliable hay crops and aquifer recharge). The value of regenerative agriculture, herb-rich grasslands for animal health, and nature-friendly farming were also better understood. A couple of

project managers commented on the popularity of species-rich grassland options over woodland because landowners and tenants don't have to alter their farming systems radically nor take land out of production. Others mentioned a change in attitude regarding soils, and a stated need to retain more trees in the landscape for shade for livestock (milk yields decrease at >25°C).

Awareness raising: the interview process became a useful bit of advocacy, as some Project Officers/Managers hadn't heard of the Partnership nor undertaken historical studies to determine whether the habitat had been prevalent within their catchments, or didn't know about the many ecosystem service benefits provided in the way of nutrient and sediment removal, carbon and flood storage, and aquifer recharge. All were provided with links to the web site and key information.

Queries raised: most of those interviewed had specific queries which were responded to straight away, including:

The management of **ditches and grips** (for sites that are too wet for a hay cut) – referred to Chapters 7 and 9 of the technical handbook
<https://floodplainmeadows.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/Floodplain%20Meadows%20-%20Beauty%20and%20Utility%20A%20Technical%20Handbook.pdf> and
<https://floodplainmeadows.org.uk/advice/meadow-how-to/care-existing-meadow/manage-your-site>

Work to quantify the amount of **sediment stored** (i.e. kept out of rivers)
https://floodplainmeadows.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/research_zone/d96462.pdf

Work to quantify **carbon storage potential** – FMP needs to make sure those looking into this (e.g. Wilder Carbon <https://www.wildercarbon.com/> and Carbon Quester <https://www.carbonquester.com/>) are using up to date figures for wet grassland from current research
<https://floodplainmeadows.org.uk/sites/default/files/Soil%20Carbon%20stocks%20summary%20130619.pdf>

Work summarising **P removal potential** of floodplain hay meadows
<https://floodplainmeadows.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Vicky%20Bowski%20Biological%20Conservation%202023.pdf>

Concerns regarding **dog faeces** (from the most urban project) and quality of hay/health implications for livestock. Is it an issue on other sites? How to zone public access.

Expected species-richness of **MG8** grassland - BNG assessment method (used in some projects) classifies even those MG8 communities thought to be in good condition as “moderate” because they contain <15 species/m²

Advice on whether floodplain meadows are flagged under **UK Hab 4** (g3a5 lowland hay meadow MG4 and g3a6 MG8?)

Advice on the **most successful and cost-effective establishment method** – green hay or seed?

Is it acceptable to use **bought in seed/seed mixes**, or material that has been harvested off site?

How long it takes to **reduce P levels** in soils, and how long to develop more species-rich swards?

What are ideal stocking rates/densities? Is there any published work on the value of species-rich floodplain grasslands for livestock/nutrition and health of animals?

How to access historical maps e.g. Dudley Stamp Land Use maps. NB Dr Iris Kramer is apparently working on 1st edition river course maps (information from The Rivers Trust).

It is recommended that answers to these commonly encountered information requests are made easily accessible from the web site, possibly through a **Frequently Asked Questions** document and through the newsletter.

Uncertainties: Many of the projects interviewed were either still in development or in the process of submitting their bids, so there may be considerable delays whilst these are reviewed. Even when offers have been made there may be further delays whilst details are being negotiated, which can be very challenging for landowners who need to plan ahead.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It proved surprisingly difficult and time consuming to obtain contact details for a number of the projects, and getting responses was even more so. This was presumably at least partly because project staff have been pre-occupied with relatively complex bid preparation and tight timescales.

Reading through the various LR project web sites and descriptions, the following land use objectives were mentioned frequently:

- restore valley hydrology; plant riparian corridors
- floodplain reconnection, floodplain wetlands; beavers
- riparian and wetland zones; better connected wetlands; new grazing marsh
- wildflower meadows; expand traditional hay meadows
- creating nature-rich wetland habitat; naturally wetted landscapes
- productive farmed landscapes; healthier diet for grazing animals
- create pools and scrapes; create leaky dams.

The use of the term “wetlands” is perhaps unfortunate as it is vague and covers many different interpretations, from seasonally flooded grasslands and fens to scrapes and open water. The same applies to the terms “grazing marsh” and “meadow” which sometimes referred to upland hay meadows or lowland species-rich grasslands not in floodplain. These wide terms were not necessarily very helpful in determining which projects were most relevant and most likely to result in the creation or restoration of floodplain meadow habitat.

In one project, species-rich grassland and floodplain meadows were **the most popular options** with landowners, the overwhelming majority of whom are keen to maintain their current farming systems. Farmers in the project area are very familiar with managing seasonally flooded land, and are happy to accept slow change to improve the species-richness of permanent pasture.

Ten priority projects were identified for FMP to focus on, contacting and developing working relationships with project staff as soon as practicable, in the hope that they are approved to project implementation stage (or the partners decide to progress the aims/ambitions/visions through other routes). Most expressed a desire for advice and guidance on topics such as water management and sources of seed, the development of management prescriptions, or for the provision of training and awareness events such as workshops and site visits. Several asked for information on nearby demonstration sites they could take landowners/land managers to see as part of engagement.

Two projects are suitable for **keeping in touch with** as they are currently considering land use options which may include floodplain meadows, depending on further hydrological and habitat surveys. A further LR project, where floodplain meadows were not a specific focus, is collecting data on the aquifer recharge function of floodplain wetlands, a **key current research gap** that should be pursued.

Six of the projects that didn't respond may be **worth contacting again** if time allows, as they certainly have the potential for floodplain restoration and/or creation.

In conclusion, the top priority LR projects have the potential to deliver significant areas of species-rich multi-functional floodplain grassland, and to yield a large amount of very useful data on restoration, creation and effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Make contact as soon as possible and **build long term partnerships** with those projects identified as a high priority because of the potential for landscape scale creation and restoration of floodplain meadows.

Contact those projects requiring future support, as indicated in the transcript of the telephone interviews.

Make it clear what FMP can offer in the way of **paid-for advisory services** – many projects have included specialist consultancy services within their budgets.

Build a **training programme** as part of succession planning, a light touch ambassador scheme based on existing workshops/training events and NE/EA webinars. Enable project staff to join the **Associate Members' network** and invite them to monthly winter get-togethers exploring subjects of mutual interest.

Develop a forum for **sharing experience and data**: many of the priority projects will generate hugely useful information – learning by doing – so FMP should be involved in helping to set up **monitoring schemes** (hydrological and botanical, investigating the cost/success of different restoration techniques and timescales), plus capturing best practice from carbon and natural capital markets to help lever investment from the private sector.

Develop a **Frequently Asked Questions** information sheet for the FMP web site and newsletter.