

## SHROPSHIRE HILLS AONB FARMING WORKING GROUP

### Note of meeting 25 September 2007

#### Present:

Phil Holden	Shropshire Hills AONB Team
Ian Dormor	Shropshire Hills AONB Team
Cath Landles	Shropshire Hills AONB Team
Stuart Minton-Beddoes	Country Land and Business Association
Michael Whithouse	Individual member, AONB Partnership
David Ragbourne	Natural England
Joy Greenall	Clun Forest Land, Life & Livelihoods Project
Rev Nick Read	Chaplain for Agriculture and Rural Life, Hereford Diocese
Andy Grundy	Heartwoods

#### Apologies:

Pete Carty (National Trust), Bill Klemperer (English Heritage).

#### Matters arising from notes of the last meeting

Action re. demonstration farms in relation to climate change. Ian had made enquiries with Defra about funding for demonstration farms. The initial response was inconclusive. In view of this David offered also to enquire about funding possibilities from Defra sources.

Carbon management. It had been anticipated that this meeting would look at the role of land management in relation to carbon, but time and other agenda items had not allowed this. Some suggestions of possible external speakers were made for a future meeting of the Working Group.

#### 1. Land, Life & Livelihoods Project (presentation by Joy Greenall)

Joy gave a presentation on the project and circulated a handout of the slides. The project had arisen out of the Down to Earth process in the Clun Forest as part of the Blue Remembered Hills project. Consultations had revealed widespread concern about the long term viability of farming in the area, with big implications for the local community and landscape. Funding from the Sustainable Development Fund had enabled the project to engage further with farmers, and then to hold a series of events and visits looking at practical solutions. Many lessons had been learned about the process, and these were detailed in the slides. New partnerships with other organisations had been forged, but there was a need to proceed carefully in manageable steps. The events and visits arranged under the project had been very valuable in sparking new ideas. The forthcoming planning event would look at such issues as affordable housing, diversification and climate change.

The figures on attendance at events showed the success of the project, but the immediate problems of farming were still a major issue. Joy felt that bovine TB was overtaking everything as an issue, but was still not really being talked about. A large part of the valley was affected, and restriction of livestock sales was having a major impact on cashflow for many farmers. Nick Read said that Herefordshire Rural Hub was looking into providing a service for people who wished to leave agriculture, e.g. financial advice. The Fresh Start programme was mentioned, which sought to link new entrants to farming with mentors. Joy said that many livestock farmers don't want to stop completely but would like to scale their enterprises down. In some cases the next generation are there, but the uncertainty of the cattle industry is discouraging young people from entering the business and preventing leavers from exiting the industry without incurring a financial loss.

Stewart Minton-Beddoes said that at a recent meeting in Ludlow with a senior Defra official, TB was the strongest issue raised. There were issues about valuations, especially of pedigree stock, and inadequate action was being taken in relation to badgers. Joy said that there were a wide variety of views about badgers and TB. There was some fear within the Land, Life & Livelihoods project of starting the discussion, as it might set farming and wildlife interests against each other, when good links had been forged. There may be some way to discuss the issue through the project e.g. in an event, but it was agreed that decisions at the highest level of Defra were the most significant factor. It was noted that the debate is very polarised, and there may be value in collating local information on the economic effects of the problem. This topic could be suitable for student thesis.

## **2. Review of the AONB Management Plan**

Phil said that the full review of the Management Plan was now under way. The focus for this meeting however was the annual update of Actions in the Plan. Rather than present a large table of actions for comment, he had circulated a simple list of the actions included and invited comment on priorities, progress and any omissions. The actions were grouped under broad headings of farm conservation & resource protection; business development; training & skills; strengthening of networks; and lobbying, awareness raising & education.

David said that Natural England were undertaking a national review of agri-environment scheme targeting, and would be consulting with partners on this in due course. There was a new spatial approach using maps of environmental assets, to complement the Joint Character Area approach.

Nick Read highlighted the forthcoming changes in regional structures which will see the Regional Development Agencies taking on responsibility for regional planning.

David noted that the Rural Enterprise Scheme had been very effective in supporting farmers who had ideas, and asked about its replacement by the aspects of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) being implemented by Advantage West Midlands. It was clarified that the Regional Implementation Plan had identified priority sectors as food & drink, tourism and environmental technology. Action plans for these sectors were now being written, and projects would be 'commissioned' by AWM rather schemes being made open to businesses to apply for. There was an emphasis on collaborative groups and the role of the Rural Hubs. Concern was expressed about whether this approach would deliver against local needs. Phil said that the AONB had been making a concerted effort to forge better links with AWM, and was looking closely at the implementation of RDPE and possibilities of influencing it. Nick Read said that the Regional Rural Affairs Forum had looked at organising site visits for relevant AWM staff, and felt that this was still worth pursuing. Phil said that the AONB Partnership was looking at the possibilities of becoming a deliverer of the 'LEADER' element of RDPE, which had a strong focus on social capacity building.

It was suggested that the AONB Partnership might develop a vision regarding the type of farming that should be encouraged in the AONB in specific areas like the Clun Forest. Natural England was also investigating this. Their project on climate change adaptation was based on the Shropshire Hills Joint Character Area.

There was discussion on the end of the ESA schemes and the implications of many farmers ending ESA agreements not being able to get into Higher Level Stewardship. David commented that the level of spending on the Entry Level Scheme was ten times higher

than that spent on HLS – currently in the order of £80-100m per year. Those ESA holders opting to go into ELS rather than HLS would find their payments reduced from £50/ha under ESA to £30/ha under the Entry Level Scheme.

### **3. Updates**

#### **a) Local Products Directory**

This follows on from the successful work with Farmers Markets, and will be produced in the form of a website and a printed directory by the end of the Financial Year. The database side of the website would be capable of use by other directories and updated at a central point. The producers list would also become a contact group/ network on which other work e.g. training could be based. On account of Natural England funding, the environmental accreditation side is being emphasised, with a trial of new methods of highlighting participation in farm conservation schemes.

#### **b) Bishop's Castle Power Plant and energy crops feedstock**

Andy Grundy had been invited to the meeting to update on this topic. The AONB had given Heartwoods a short contract to look at woodfuel development, including the implications for the AONB of the power plant proposal. The Bishop's Castle plant would be the same as that proposed for Tenbury Wells and the one already existing at Eccleshall (Staffs). Ideally the supply chain should be broad-based, with the cheapest sources being waste wood (clean recovered wood, composted material and fibre from primary timber processing), followed by energy crops and then material from under-managed woodlands. *Miscanthus* had been planted to supply the plant at Eccleshall, but was in fact now going to Drax and Rugeley.

The Tenbury Wells plant was led by Worcester County Council, and a contract had been established with a local sawmill for a guaranteed fuel supply. The local authority had stipulated that 10% of fuel should come from local sources. It did not appear likely that either plant would stimulate large scale growing of energy crops.

Stewart Minton-Beddoes said that a recent meeting with farmers had apparently been about offering contracts, but that factory wood waste was now seeming more important. The prices offered were uneconomic for woodland owners and the project might not get off the ground if prices offered were too low. It was noted that timber prices have risen since the idea was proposed, and not enough thought has been given to the supply chain. There had not been enough consideration early on of using the heat as well as generating electricity, as this is what makes such a plant efficient in energy terms. It was felt that public relations for the project had been poorly handled.

Phil felt that the implications for the AONB were likely to be less than initially envisaged. Direct impacts would be less as the site is outside the AONB, and with a large element of waste wood, the implications for land management may also be less. Transport of material remained an important consideration.

#### **c) Environmental Stewardship**

David explained that existing agreements under the 'classic' schemes (ESA, Countryside Stewardship) would be honoured, and a limited amount of capital is still available for these. There was a big push by Defra to achieve 60% uptake into the Entry Level Scheme, covering 500,000ha. Applications to the Higher Level Scheme now involve a pre-Farm Environmental Plan (FEP) meeting as a primary assessment of any proposal before application is made. This helps to ensure the quality of applications, given the competitiveness of the scheme. There is also a fast-track for HLS applications affecting SSSIs which are in unfavourable condition.

#### **d) FWAG update**

Becky Floate is conducting a series of drop-in advisory clinics in the Clun Forest, and Alison Jones is doing the same in the Long Mynd-Stiperstones area. South Shropshire District Council have linked to some of the events to offer advice on planning issues.

#### **e) Natural England Multiple Objectives Project (NEMO)**

This project is largely an internal exercise for Natural England, focused on certain pilot areas, looking at how the organisation can best deliver its new remit. Through the AONB, it was agreed to spend some of the available money undertaking farmer interviews in South Shropshire. This work was carried out largely by Michael Whithouse and Joy Greenall using the Land, Life and Livelihoods approach, but focussing the interviews on how Natural England can work with farmers. While the poor summer had made the process difficult, the report was complete, and will be discussed with relevant Natural England staff at a meeting in October.

It was found that farmers generally agreed with the objectives of Natural England, though they think about and describe the issues in a different way. Many expressed concerns over farm viability. The barriers to delivering Natural England's objectives were identified by land managers as follows: insufficient time (97%); insufficient money (87%); insufficient labour (77%); and bureaucracy (77%).

There was a question now of what to do next. There is potential for further analysis of the findings, and a suggestion to establish some kind of ongoing structure for consultation with farmers. Nick Read supported the setting up of reference groups in the vein of the Regional Panels under MAFF. Stewart agreed that these had been successful. Joy said that farmers were very interested but were hampered by time constraints.

#### **f) Historic Protection Review**

As time was running short, this item was held over until a future meeting.

#### **4. AOB**

There was a suggestion that Liam Byrne, the Minister for the Region, would be a worthwhile invitee to a visit, perhaps in the Clun.

#### **5. Date of next meeting**

Tues 11 March 10am, venue to be confirmed.