

REFOCUSING FUTURE RURAL SUPPORT

# New route for agri-environment schemes?

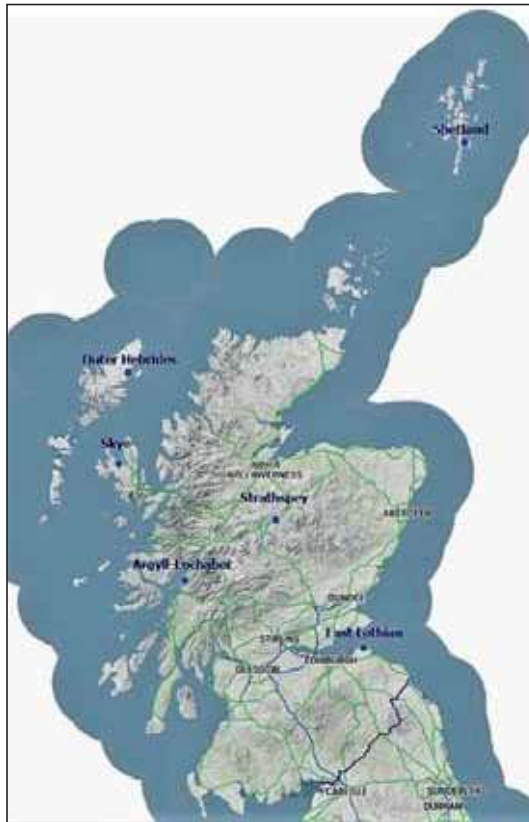
*SNH agriculture policy manager Ross Lilley introduces an outcome-based approach to agri-environment schemes (POBAS), an SNH-led project exploring an innovative approach to delivering environmental outcomes on farm and croft land.*

**T**HE PROJECT is part of SNH's broader natural capital pilot programme, which aims to test natural capital and outcomes-based approaches to inform future rural policy.

Refocusing future rural support around investment in natural capital can not only help land-based businesses contribute to restoring nature and reducing our country's contribution to climate change, it can also help to make these businesses more resilient, support long-term jobs and strengthen Scotland's green brand.

Working in partnership with SRUC, The Farm Environment Ltd, Shetland Amenity Trust/RSPB and the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP), the project has engaged with approximately 50 farmers and crofters in six areas across Scotland – Argyll, Skye, Strathspey, Outer Hebrides, Shetland and East Lothian.

Drawing its inspiration from pioneering projects in other countries, this new approach aims to be simpler, crofter-led



and locally targeted, moving away from the rules-based approaches used in the past. It involves developing a score card system relevant to the local landscape which assesses habitat quality and current management. The idea is that payments would be linked to the scores – the higher the score, the higher the payment.

Phase 1 involved a series of workshops in each region to explore, with participants, the payment-by-results concept. It identified outcomes that could be delivered in different farming conditions and developed score cards for measuring quality of outcomes in relation to potential payments. Outcomes explored in the crofting areas include:

Argyll/Lochaber: upland habitat mosaics;

Skye: inbye croft diversity based on mixed livestock semi-natural grassland management;

Shetland: peatland quality and wader habitat;

Outer Hebrides: machair and peatland common grazings.

All projects propose to complete the first phase this year. With positive feedback from participating farmers and crofters, the project is moving into phase 2 to trial how a payment-by-results scheme can work on individual farms and crofts.

## Getting the measure right is just the start

*It's been a huge pleasure and privilege to be involved in these first steps towards a more outcome- or results-based way of rewarding crofters for the wider benefits of their work, writes Gwyn Jones of EFNCP.*

**A**S ANGUS McHattie reported from the Burren in issue 107 of *The Crofter*, schemes taking this approach have been tried and tested with real farmers in Ireland since 2004. One of the most gratifying things last year was to be able to bring Burren farmer Michael Davoren and hen harrier project ecologist Ryan Wilson-Parr over to share their experiences with groups of crofters and farmers in Argyll, Skye and Shetland and to take my SAC Consulting and SNH colleagues over to Ireland to see their projects on the ground. They've shown what's possible and that people like it. If they can do it, so can we.

This year I'm still involved in Ireland, trying to work out how those projects, and others being run as local innovations as part of their European Innovation Partnership implementation, can be somehow



Burren, a limestone-based karst landscape

mainstreamed – how they can 'inform the next RDP', to use the department's words.

One thing that's becoming really obvious is that getting the management and means of scoring right, while essential, is only the start of developing an approach which really works. The project team

there are also advising, cajoling, making collaboration possible, experimenting, demonstrating, monitoring and of course telling others about the work.

If this is true on farms, how much more on small crofts, and especially how much more on common grazings? As some of you

know, I've been trying get funding together to look at the opportunities and potential impediments of this approach on grazings for some time. I'm really grateful to LEADER Innse Gall and SNH for making this possible. It's just a small project, but these are the kind of questions we hope to explore further in it.

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# Can a results based agri-environment scheme work for crofting on Skye?

*At the start of the phase 1 project in Skye, I was really not sure of the answer to the question, says SAC Portree's Janette Sutherland. But after a series of three meetings, and participating crofters' feedback, I am closer to saying the answer is "yes!"*

**T**HESE THREE meetings in phase 1 were: the Irish experience, with guest speakers from the Burren and hen harriers projects; testing score cards in croft fields in Skye; and discussing payment rationales.

At our first meeting we explored what public goods are in a Skye crofting context. The discussion covered a broader range than just environmental public goods, including those that some might not consider to be of public value, such as animal health and welfare and food security. All close to the hearts of crofters. There was lively discussion on how high nature value farming and crofting embraced these and, although the project is focused on environmental outcomes, these were important considerations to take into account when exploring how a scheme might work in a crofting context.

*"A very interesting project concerning potential future land-use support. It's about how to strike a balance between agricultural production and the environment, keeping in mind the concerns and needs of the greater public good."*

*~ Yvonne White, SCF chair ~*



Skye group test out score cards in the field

© Janette Sutherland, SAC Portree

At the second meeting the score cards were demonstrated, after testing by an SAC ecologist in various croft units in Skye. The Skye crofters found them easy to understand and use, despite the non-optimal season to be assessing both indicator species and structure. The colour indicator species crib sheets were well received.

The final meeting aimed to illustrate how the payment rationales and calculations could be designed to complement the score card(s) which were tested on Skye inbye croft grasslands. In a results-based scheme we discussed how payments increase with higher scores and why the demands of cross-compliance might mean that very low scores receive no payment.

Crofting units, herds and flocks can often be smaller than average. We discussed the concept of depression, ie paying more for the first hectares or livestock units, specifically situations where this is justifiable and where it is not.

I am very grateful to the crofters who participated in phase 1 and look forward to hearing what phase 2 will discover.

## Developing a results-based scheme in Shetland

*Nathalie Pion, RSPB Scotland, outlines the project in Shetland.*



Curlew chicks, South Mainland, Shetland

© Nathalie Pion

**D**ISCUSSIONS on future agri-environment schemes started in Shetland two years ago, when a group formed bringing together agricultural and conservation stakeholders to look for ways of supporting both agriculture and the environment in a place where high nature value farming is widespread.

Learning about the successful Burren experience from Irish farmer Michael Davoren in a public talk last September inspired local enthusiasm for the results-based approach. A series of workshops in partnership with the POBAS project followed.

These gave interested farmers and crofters an opportunity to think about local environmental outcomes and how they could be measured. They identified wader habitat, peatland and crofting landscape mosaic as priorities. Now progress is underway to develop the approach.

On the hill, with support from SNH's POBAS project, RSPB Scotland staff worked with the local peatland action officer and crofters engaged in peatland management to create a

first version of a score card for blanket bogs. With further testing on the ground to improve it, the score card could guide management of the habitat in the future.

On inbye land, 10 crofters and farmers across Shetland have been busy surveying waders and their habitats on their own land. They are taking part in the 10-month ParkLife project, led by Shetland livestock marketing group, with RSPB Scotland providing monitoring support.

Participants have been collecting valuable information on wader activity and vegetation length, field wetness, plant diversity, management practices and predators during the breeding season. They are building a clearer picture of how farmland waders are doing; and shaping a wader habitat score card that works for them. They are also experimenting with new ways of monitoring farmland wildlife and helping define how agricultural and environmental management can be integrated.

The hope is that adopting a results-based approach, with land managers involved in designing a scheme that they identify with, could bring a fresh energy to Shetland crofting communities and lead to an increase in agri-environment scheme uptake in Shetland.

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# Outer Hebrides – shared steps for common grazings



Crofter moving cattle on machair, North Uist

*This is a project led by EFNCP, funded by Outer Hebrides LEADER and SNH, explains Robyn Stewart of EFNCP.*

**T**HE AIM is to develop a results-based approach to agri-environment schemes which rewards traditional crofting management and acknowledges delivery of public goods in the particularly challenging context of common grazings.

The intention is to feed into the national process of developing post-CAP support, with our results complementing those from Skye and Shetland for croft inbye and apportionments; and from Argyll for upland grazings.

Crofting has long shaped the landscapes of the Outer Hebrides and traditional management coexists with, and plays a role in maintaining, internationally rare and important habitats like blanket bog and machair. In turn these habitats provide us with numerous public goods including carbon storage, climate regulation, fresh water and biodiversity. Although common grazings cover a massive 71% of agricultural land in the Outer Hebrides, their use has steadily declined over recent years.

Working with graziers and common grazings committees during the design and testing stages, our project involves developing a score card system relevant to the diversity of grazings in the Western Isles. This is key to producing a viable alternative to current agri-environment schemes which works financially, practically and socially.

Unfortunately, we had only held community meetings in Harris and Barra before COVID-19 intervened. So for the past few months we have been depending on input at a distance from individuals contacted prior to lockdown and on the support of the steering group members: Sally Reynolds, Carloway Estate Trust, Donald MacKinnon, SCF and Johanne Ferguson, SNH, to provide advice and input as we prepare for the gradual opening up of society.

We are grateful to LEADER and SNH for being flexible and allowing us a three-month extension – so all being well, the coming months will see us coming to a common grazing near you.

*“Imminent changes to the agricultural support system make this a more important time than ever to be discussing what future environmental schemes should look like. New schemes must be easily accessible, they should reward crofters for the environmental work we already do and encourage change where necessary to achieve desirable outcomes. The innovative, bottom-up nature of the work being carried out across the crofting counties to develop results-based schemes is most welcome.”*

*~ Donald MacKinnon, SCF vice-chair, Lewis ~*



Gathering on the moor in Amol in February, Lewis

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