

Natural England and Conservation Grade to collaborate in farmland biodiversity drive

A landmark agreement has been reached between Natural England, the government's advisor on the natural environment, and the Conservation Grade *Nature Friendly Farming* scheme to work together to increase biodiversity on farms across the country. As well as recognising the roles of farmers and government, this agreement will mobilise the huge potential of food brands and their consumers to support the restoration and management of nature throughout the food chain.

Natural England's director of land management, Ian Fugler, said Conservation Grade's involvement in on-farm research and its innovative market-led approach could be a key element in the delivery of the 'sustainable intensification' agenda in the UK, as well as elsewhere in the EU.

"It is vital that an increase in production fully considers the impact on the environment, and measures are put into place to ensure that farmland biodiversity is protected and enhanced," he said. "Conservation Grade has been driving forward this agenda for some years and we are pleased to be working with an organisation that has so much experience in delivering profitable farming in a sustainable, wildlife friendly way."

Conservation Grade, in which farmers create and manage specific wildlife habitats on their least productive land, follows a scientific approach that has seen up to a 41 per cent increase in birds and a thirty fold increase in small mammals such as water voles.

Tim Nevard, chief executive of Conservation Grade, says he is delighted that Natural England recognise the expertise within the Conservation Grade *Nature Friendly Farming* team, and is looking forward to an extremely fruitful working relationship.

"Restoring biodiversity on farmland has to be a priority or we simply won't be able to maintain the natural capital required to sustainably meet the massive global increases in demand for food that are forecast," he said.

"The partnership between Natural England, as the deliverer of publicly-funded agri-environment schemes, and Conservation Grade, which has established commercial

arrangements with such well-known brands as Allinson, Jordans and Vitacress to drive farmland conservation, can only go from strength to strength.”

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Photo caption: [tbc]

Notes to Editors

About Natural England

Natural England is the government's advisor on the natural environment. Established in 2006 its work is focused on enhancing England's wildlife and landscapes and maximising the benefits they bring to the public.

- It establishes and cares for England's main wildlife and geological sites, ensuring that over 4,000 National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest are looked after and improved.
- It works to ensure that England's landscapes are effectively protected, designating England's National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and advising on their conservation.
- It runs England's Environmental Stewardship green farming schemes that deliver over £400 million a year to farmers and landowners, enabling them to enhance the natural environment across two thirds of England's farmland.
- It funds, manages, and provides scientific expertise for hundreds of conservation projects each year, improving the prospects for thousands of England's species and habitats.
- It promotes access to the wider countryside, helping establish National Trails and coastal trails and ensuring that the public can enjoy and benefit from them.

About Conservation Grade

Conservation Grade is an independent, non-profit accreditation organisation that aims to set up commercial relationships between farmers and customers to support a farming system that optimises both crop yields and wildlife conservation.

This makes Conservation Grade a truly unique system of sustainable farming, founded on science and commercial viability. It is congruent with, and significantly builds upon, government agri-environment schemes and as such is singularly recognised by The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) study. TEEB is the leading international policy initiative chaired by G8, the EU, and Defra with identifying and promulgating sustainable production systems capable of making a meaningful contribution to the conservation of global biodiversity by the private sector. In return for a contracted premium price for their grain, the Conservation Grade protocol places seven key requirements on its farmers:

1. Comply with Conservation Grade production standards.
2. Commit 10% of the farmed area to a specific range of managed wildlife habitats.
3. Hold full membership of an approved Assured Food Standards farm assurance scheme.
4. Participate in induction and annual Conservation Grade training programmes.
5. Create a whole farm environment plan.
6. Pass an annual independent CMi audit and five yearly habitat assessments.
7. Be members of the Guild of Conservation Grade Producers.

Measurable benefits to wildlife

In trials, turning 10% of land over to the protocol has resulted in a: 41% per cent increase in birds; five to eighteen fold increase in butterflies; a ten to forty fold increase in bumblebees and a thirty fold increase in small mammals such as water voles within certain habitats on-farm. In certain circumstances, bumblebee numbers have reached levels more than 600-fold over the crop.