

Press release: Appeal for landowners to take part in pioneering project

The Water for Farming and Wildlife (WFFW) project, a partnership between the Environment Agency and RSPB, is looking for landowners who can offer one to five hectares of land near to the estuary to work with them (costs to be covered) for a duration of nine or 18 months.

The project started in 2015 with the Environment Agency and RSPB researching the feasibility of techniques that could be used to both create permanent or temporary wetland habitats and provide management benefits to local farmers, such as by helping control pests control and irrigation.

This research included looking at similar studies already carried out in the Netherlands and the US.

In 2018, the team carried out experiments on 10m x 10m plots that were filled with water with the change in certain soil nutrients, water quality and wildlife assessed. While small, the trial plots quickly attracted wading birds, including moorhens.

The team would now like to carry out field trials on plots averaging 2ha and are looking for landowners to take part.

Alys Farndale, of the Environment Agency, said:

We're appealing to landowners to offer some land so that we can study the potential risks and benefits to soil health.

So far, early results from our small-scale trials suggest that land can be brought back into use with no discernible differences to growing crops.

The field scale trials will help us to fully understand potential risks, benefits and logistics of temporary wetlands in the Humber area, as well as understanding benefits to wildlife.

Turning fields into temporary wetland can be good crop rotation practice. Other studies, such as in the Netherlands, suggest that it could even lessen the need for pesticides, and we are keen to test whether this is true for farmland around the Humber.

Seonaidh Jamieson, who lead on the project for the RSPB, said:

We need to think of novel ways to provide space for nature and work with the elements.

Temporary wetlands could help link vital habitat for waders if adopted into agricultural rotations in the future.

Being involved in this stage of the project means you will help to collect essential information to shape the future of the landscape.

The project is being done alongside the Humber Strategy Review, which is investigating ways of managing tidal flood risk over the next 100 years due to the threat of rising sea levels.

Miss Farndale said:

Climate change is a real threat. More intense rainfall is becoming more frequent and climate change is already increasing sea levels around the UK coast.

A changing climate will alter the frequency, intensity, duration and timing of extreme weather – as a result of which, we expect to see an increase in extreme events such as flooding.

We need to develop ways to adapt to this changing climate.

Miss Farndale added that the Water for Farming and Wildlife project also links in with the Government's plans on how to support farmers and landowners after we leave the EU.

Farmers and landowners currently receive a payment through the Common Agricultural Policy but the Government plans to introduce a 'public money for public goods' system post Brexit," she said.

This vision is a shift in how farmers are rewarded for their work and is outlined in Defra's Environmental Land Management scheme.

James Copeland, from the NFU, said:

With changes to future reward schemes and climate change, the results of this project could provide further tools for farmers to consider within their farming business and future support.

To show your interest or for more information, email alys.farndale@environment-agency.gov.uk. The deadline is Friday 14 June.