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Co-operative Management of the Agricultural Environment

The aim of this study was to evaluate whether the UK would benefit from extending and developing “group application” options within agri-environment schemes (AES). It considered whether in the UK there is a role for organisations like the Dutch Environmental Co-operatives (ECs) in helping to further integrate farming and environmental objectives and thereby improve the environment. ECs are local organisations of mainly farmers, often including non-farmers, who work in close collaboration with each other and with various local and national agencies, to integrate nature management into farming practices, by adopting a pro-active approach based on a local and regional perspective.

The mis-match between the spatial characteristics of the environment and land ownership and land management suggests that scheme prescriptions that permit goods to be produced by clubs of land managers which reach across land ownership and management boundaries - so as to be contiguous with natural features and geographical boundaries – would benefit environmental management by allowing the landscape to be worked whole rather than piecemeal.

This research addressed the theoretical problems and benefits of club provision of agri-environmental goods. The evidence was derived from a literature review and face-to-face interviews with farmer and non-farmer members of ECs, academics, representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture (MinLNV), scientists and the Forestry Commission.

There are about 124 ECs, with approximately 9,500 members, in the Netherlands. Besides being involved in environmental enhancement, the research found that they play an important role in developing the rural economy. Support from an extensive range of government and quasi-government organisations has been a key factor in their formation, as had been a positive attitude to co-operation.

There are substantial similarities between the UK and the Netherlands with respect to the policy environment, agricultural production techniques and the increasing dependency of farms on diversified income and the wider rural economy. Historically, Dutch environmental policy has used different instruments, in particularly the use of land purchase, but in recent years the instruments and mechanisms employed in both countries have converged. The UK rural development strategy, for example, as expressed in Rural Strategy 2004, aims to empower regional and local partners by “bringing resources and decision-making at a more local level”, thereby playing to the particular strengths of ECs.

The research concluded that ECs could play an important role in addressing current environmental problems in the UK and in contributing to environmental targets related to water quality, flood management and water abstraction. ECs offer an additional instrument through which win-win solutions to these problems can be identified at a scale above that of the individual farm business.