

CONSERVATION HEADLANDS WITH PERENNIAL WILDFLOWERS AND GRASS

One way to improve the nature conservation value of an arable farm without serious impact on profitability is to establish wildflower and grass strips as conservation headlands. (Termed arable buffer strips under DEFRA Environmental Stewardship) These are separately managed strips around selected edges of fields in which the agro-ecological conditions are managed to encourage the establishment of a non-aggressive, diverse flora which provides a habitat and food source for desirable fauna.

THE BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION HEADLANDS

- Limit invasion of the field from the boundary by aggressive weeds such as *Galium* and *Bromus*.
- Flowers provide a nectar source for hoverflies which can suppress invasion by cereal aphids.
- The plants and their leaf litter provide cover for predator insects and spiders, aiding in Integrated Pest Management (**IPM**)
- Insects and other invertebrates encouraged by the floristic diversity provide an essential protein source for broods of game-birds, thrushes, finches and buntings.
- The diverse ground cover can provide nest sites for ground nesting birds and sunning sites for game birds.
- The floristic diversity provides food for a wide variety of butterflies and pollinating insects.
- The flowers are pleasant to look at and foster an image of environmentally conscious agriculture.
- Can be used to encourage walkers to use footpaths where these have been diverted around the headlands.

Management requirements are not necessarily complicated, they vary according to the individual farmer's objectives and local conditions. In general, care is necessary to avoid spray drift onto the conservation headland from normal operations carried out on the rest of the field. In the initial stages it may be necessary to apply a well timed mowing or selective herbicide to control aggressive weeds to enable the desirable species to become established.

After the initial investment in establishment, the conservation headland should require no expensive management input. Topping (working from the centre of the field towards the boundary) in late winter of alternate years is often all that is required. A conservation headland should provide a good long term investment in farmer satisfaction and public relations as well as a genuine conservation benefit.

SEED MIXTURES

The seed mixture should consist of non invasive species including a slow growing grass such as red fescue plus 5% tussock grass such as cocksfoot or oatgrass and up to 10 wild flowers appropriate to the soil type. Seed and further advice can be obtained from:

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