

NELMS: Options review

Option (s) reviewed:

UB15 Stone-faced hedgebank restoration

Option use data

UB15: 25 agreements; 502 m/yr; £28K

UOB15: no data

No available information on designations, features or species.

Delivery of environmental outcomes

Biodiversity

Stone-faced hedgebanks often support rich lichen and moss communities. They can also have rich and attractive higher plant floras, with species such as ferns, navelwort (pennywort) and stonycrops growing in the cracks and crevices. Both birds like tits and bumblebees will nest in the cracks. Lizards and many invertebrates will bask on the stones. Such banks also provide habitats for rare hole nesting bees and wasps, in addition to mice, voles and weasels (Devon Hedge Group).

Resource Protection

The Environment Agency report on rural sustainable drainage systems (Avery, 2012) also suggested that field boundary options could intercept overland flow, reduce erosion and improve infiltration and sedimentation (Fera, AES review 2012). Field boundary options can particularly help prevent soil erosion by providing physical barriers to cross land flows (Land Use Consultants, 2009).

Landscape

Stone-faced hedge banks are very characteristic in the Upland Fringe and also important in the Upland ALT. All existing options are important that help conserve and enhance these landscape features that are critical to landscape character and which have been subject to significant loss in the past, and which take time to replace if lost and in some cases are irreplaceable. Important to retain and encourage option uptake (BD5303).

In the absence of schemes, the condition of the fundamental components of landscapes, such as field boundaries, would have deteriorated (Courtney et al, 2007).

Traditional boundary features such as stone-faced banks are an essential ingredient in defining local landscape across parts of the English farmed landscape, helping to define landscape character and quality in three significant respects; field pattern and scale; distinctive landscape features and local identity/sense of place (BD5303).

Historic Environment

Most stone-faced banks are very old. On the fringes of Dartmoor's open moorland, some hedges within the enclosed farmland continue the boundary walls of Bronze Age field systems, some 3,500 years old (DCC). They may survive as in-situ fossilised features beneath them. Many of these can also still be seen on the open moor. Many of Dartmoor's upland boundaries are defined by corn ditches some which date back to early medieval periods, and which can denote the past extent of attempts to take in and cultivate what was former moorland medieval cultivation (DNP). Most of Devon's hedgebanks are of at least medieval antiquity, with maybe a quarter of them being more than 800 years old (Devon County Council).

On Bodmin Moor (Cornwall), field boundaries represent a snapshot of the wider history of the moor: from the prehistoric boundaries of the first farmers breaking in the land, to the expansion and subsequent shrinkage of farming in the medieval period, to the post medieval moorland intake reflecting the tenacity of moorland farming families to work such difficult areas (Cornwall County Council).

Factors influencing delivery of environmental outcomes

Work may be carried out by farmer, staff or contractor but may not be to the appropriate style. Contractors often do work and don't fully understand what management is required (BD2117, Adviser survey).

Issue with sourcing stone for restoration as the lost stones may have been ploughed into adjoining fields or removed for other purposes. Although the prescriptions state that stone must not be taken from other hedge banks, walls or

buildings this is difficult to verify (Group).

Replacement stone may not be compatible. Incompatible stone could be a problem apart from (for instance) Dartmoor for it is now difficult to obtain natural local stone and very expensive. (Devon Hedge Group).

Stone-faced banks have a specialised flora and fauna which tends to be smothered by coarse vegetation when fenced, especially by sheep fencing. Maintaining these without fencing enhances their biodiversity and landscape value (Group).

Currently this option is only available on SDA land, however, much potential for uptake and restoration in ELS agreements in non-SDA areas (Group).

Uptake of the option is currently limited as it is capped at 40m/yr which limits the potential for uptake (Group).

Deliverability of option/s

Customer

Stone-faced banks can be 'show-pieces', especially if by farmstead or public-viewed area and provide a robust stockproof barrier without the need for fencing (Group).

Carrying out such work could be used as a means of retaining farm staff/paying farmer's own salary at quiet times. (Group).

No clarity as to whether the option applies to single or double-sided stone-faced banks (Group).

Query over suitability of the term 'hedge-bank'. To those in the SW this implies a feature consisting of a hedge and a bank, but this option is specific to the bank only (Group).

There is no definition of what actually constitutes as a stone-faced bank and is therefore suitable for the option. Many banks will be stone-faced on part of their length only, perhaps damaged areas of earth banks being repaired by stone when available (Group).

From handbook: 'It is available for existing stone-faced banks that remain substantially intact but are losing stones and have some unstable sections.' Suggest this is too vague? How many stones being lost, how frequent are the unstable sections? How big? Clarification of eligibility required (Group).

Confusion about how this annual option for restoration actually works, in particular in respect to how much work can be entered into the scheme and completed each year (Upland Group).

Are the prescriptions verifiable?

"Obtain current, dated, photographs of the bank to be restored as evidence of its condition when you joined the scheme, retain these photographs and submit a copy with your application." *Verifiable provided the photos are representative of the sections to be restored. The handbook's Section 1.6.13 is specific on what is required, including maps of photo locations. But there could be a risk that an A/H uses a section restored, say, through an earlier agreement. If an inspection did not take place until several years into the agreement, what would stop the AH showing a section of bank restored earlier, or which just happens to be in good condition already?* (Group).

"Avoid restoring stone-faced banks in adverse weather conditions, such as drought or very wet weather, as this will result in instability. Using machinery in wet weather may damage land adjacent to the bank." *Verifiable to an extent, if inspected soon after wet weather damage may have occurred* (Group).

"Stone must not be taken from other hedgebanks, walls or buildings." *Not verifiable, unless the AH can show where the stone came from or inspection coincides with very recent removal* (Group).

"Hauling stone should be done when ground conditions are firm enough to prevent soil damage." *Verifiable to an extent, if inspected soon after damage may have occurred* (Group).

“Old features, such as creep holes or built granite troughs, should be restored and retained.” Need to specify that *photographic evidence provided (see above) should include a record of these features (Group)*.

“Do not carry out restoration work on a bank with a hedge between 1 March and 31 August (the main bird breeding season).” *Only verifiable if visit undertaken at appropriate time (Group)*.

“Where a hedge already exists, do not bury a newly laid hedge in deep earth as this will prevent effective re-growth.” *Verifiable provided inspection is soon enough after the work has been completed (Group)*.

“Where the bank is crossed by a public right of way, any stiles and gates must be restored to their original form using traditional materials.” *Not verifiable unless there is a record of the features present before restoration (Group)*.

Option requires evidence of the condition of the bank at the start of the scheme which allows verification that the hedge was both suitable (Group).

Annual dated photographic evidence could be requested to demonstrate specification of work carried out (Overview Group).

Need to specify retention of invoices/records of works (Overview group).

Key conclusions

Retain and encourage option uptake to continue contribution to maintaining the condition of a fundamental component of the landscape, however, eligibility may need to be extended to non-SDA land and consideration given to increasing current cap of 40m/yr.

Improve eligibility of the option; confirm if it applies to one or both-sides of a bank; state a clear definition of what actually constitutes a stone-faced bank and drop ‘hedge’ from the title; state clear definition of acceptable.

Amend prescriptions to improve verifiability of the option.

Consider if annual payments for capital item type restoration is an appropriate method of delivery.