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Science for Environment Policy

Farmland abandonment risk highlighted in new UK study

Traditional, high-nature-value (HNV) grasslands are at risk of being abandoned by farmers in the future — in turn, risking the wildlife they support, warns a new UK study. Farmers interviewed by the researchers had weak motivations to protect grasslands, as they felt that financial incentives for conservation are low and that traditional management practices are inconvenient. More dialogue between farmers and conservationists could be part of the solution, the study suggests.

HNV grasslands, such as floodplain meadows, need continued and traditional forms of land management for their survival. Traditional practices, such as following hay cutting with livestock grazing at particular times of the year, in harmony with local cycles of nature, are responsible for the historic creation of the grasslands in the first place. The best examples of grasslands are highly valued for their diverse range of plant species and are often protected, for instance, as part of the EU's Natura 2000 network.

In Europe, farmland abandonment is most common in southern and eastern regions, while research on drivers of abandonment has mainly taken place in southern and central Europe. This new research, although small-scale and case-study based, provides new, in-depth information on potential abandonment risks in a north-west European country.

The researchers interviewed farmers and grassland-conservation stakeholders in the UK on the perspectives and motivations of farmers to protect HNV grasslands. All interviewees were involved in at least one of nine case-study meadows in central and southern England which held a range of conservation-designation statuses, from international protection (under Natura 2000) to local-government designation.

In total, 44 people were interviewed: 16 farmers, 19 stakeholders (e.g. landowners) and nine grassland-conservation specialists (from national and regional authorities, NGOs and academia).

The ageing farming population was a common concern among conservation stakeholders and specialists, who found it hard to replace retired farmers with young farmers to undertake traditional management of the land. One NGO noted that most farmers they worked with were over the age of 60. These interviews also suggested that meadows are of more interest to small-scale farmers, who are disappearing from the farming community.

All farmers interviewed acknowledged the environmental and cultural value of grasslands. However, they generally placed the most importance on the land's economic value. They noted that the financial reward for traditional management was very small and unpredictable from year to year. This means that they have little financial motivation to protect the land.

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Many of the farmers also highlighted the inconvenience of traditional management. For example, in management plans for these sites (which come as part of conservation designation), hay cutting is typically only allowed from mid-July onwards to allow ground-nesting birds to fledge and plants to produce seeds. However, the farmers felt that this timing is too late in the summer, as it reduces the hay's quality and value and forces them to cut hay at what is already a very busy time of year.

These weakening motivations for traditional grassland management among farmers mean that abandonment may become a significant risk, the study's authors conclude. To help avoid abandonment, they suggest that more dialogue is needed between conservation and farming stakeholders in order to form a better understanding of each other's views regarding the value of grasslands, and to maintain farmer interest in traditional management. Financial compensation to farmers, for example as part of agri-environment schemes, may also enhance farmers' motivations for involvement.

However, the authors also note that these steps are only part of the solution, as they do not address the issue of the farmers' age. An alternative strategy is for conservation organisations to manage grasslands themselves, but this comes at a greater cost.

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