



National Sheep Association

NSA policy position on stocking rates in upland areas managed under environmental schemes

- Sheep stocking levels should be appropriate for the individual farm and surrounding environment to balance the impact of farming activity.
- Endorsement of low stocking rates and rewilding is purely anecdotal. The only scientific assessment of stocking rates has been carried out by the James Hutton Institute; this study found positive links between species diversity and sheep grazing.
- A mosaic of habitats is the best way to encourage species diversity. Such a mix can be provided within individual farms and across many different farm types. Using environmental schemes to provide uniform stocking rates does not provide habitat diversity, as different species prefer different land management options (i.e. well grazed areas support some species and less well grazed areas support others).
- Environmental schemes are frequently based on anecdotal information and emotive feelings about wildlife. Schemes should instead be based on evidence, and there are many cases where schemes developed in the last two decades have been detrimental to both food production and the environment.
- The origin of environmental schemes was to protect the environment, wildlife and landscapes familiar throughout the UK, but such schemes fail to acknowledge that these areas are manmade and came about through hundreds of years of farming activity. Farming methods have created the environment we want to protect, so farm businesses must not be prevented from functioning at economically sustainable levels. This will ensure rural areas continue to thrive for the benefit of the environment, wildlife, tourism and local communities.

- Environmental schemes were first created when UK farmers could access headage payments for their stock under the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). There is evidence that headage payments kept stocking rates artificially high and so it was appropriate for environmental schemes (delivered under Pillar Two of the CAP) to address this. Headage payments are no longer on offer so it is vital that environmental schemes are updated to acknowledge this fundamental shift in farming policy.
- Pillar Two funds are a vital income stream for farmers operating in a market that does not deliver fair returns, and while it is right that farmers should provide public goods in return for these funds, the principle of only paying for 'income foregone' (e.g. reduced income through farming fewer sheep) is an outdated principle that needs urgent revision. A suitable balance between food production, the environment and healthy and productive sheep flocks is delivery of public goods that should be paid for under Pillar Two, and sheep farms can deliver this without sheep numbers being capped by prescriptive stocking rates.

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