

CM4b: Arable reversion to low / medium input grass

This nature-based project option will revert whole or part fields from arable use (including maize growing) to low / medium input grassland. This option should be used for fields or areas of fields that regularly flood / get waterlogged or that experience surface runoff and soil erosion. Land already funded by any other scheme (such as ELS/HLS or Countryside Stewardship) is not eligible.

Length of Nature-based Project Agreement available

1st September 2021 until 31st March 2025 (3 ½ years)

Where to use this option

- Across whole or part fields
- Cultivated land that has been arable cropped (this can include maize) for the past 3 or more years.
- Land that is adjacent to a permanent watercourse (including ditches) or has high connectivity to a watercourse via a road, track or any other flow pathway.

Where this option cannot be used

- Do not use this option adjacent to SSSIs or other botanically valuable sites as identified on the Environmental Information Map.
- Do not use this option where evidence exists for rare arable plants / weeds.
- Do not use this option on fields / parcels / strips that have already been taken out of arable production.

Requirements

Establish and manage plots according to the specification set out in the Nature-based Project Agreement relevant to each plot. This specification will be specific to each farm and location but will be based on the following:

Establishment:

- Assess whether there are any issues of soil compaction and, if necessary, plan appropriate timely cultivations such as subsoiling to resolve these before establishing the new sward.

- If there is a heavy weed burden, spray with a herbicide such as glyphosate before cultivation.

Establish grass either:

- Between 15th July and 30th September 2021, *or*
- Between 15th March and 31st May 2022 (in this situation the plots should be cover cropped between September 2021 and March 2022 and the grass established after that)
- Autumn (August/September) is a suitable time to establish grass. If you have to establish in spring, then use a higher seed rate.

Broadcast or drill seed into a firm, consolidated and clean seedbed and then roll or harrow to help ensure good seed to soil contact, retain moisture and reduce movement of slugs within the soil profile. Direct drilling into stubble is permitted as long as it results in an adequate level of grass establishment (i.e. approx. 80% groundcover by 1st December 2021).

- Sow the species mix and seed rate specified in the Nature-based Project Agreement relevant to each plot. General requirements will be:
 - Establish a sward of at least one agricultural grass species, plus legumes such as clover if desired. Wildflowers and herbs such as yarrow and plantain may also be included.

Cutting and topping:

- To control weeds and ensure that a dense sward that reduces runoff is established, in the first 12 months after establishment:
 - plots should be cut or topped regularly (at least *3 times*) during the growing season *and*
 - plots should be topped or grazed at least *once* during the winter.
- From year 2 onwards and once established, cut the sward at least once each year. Farmers are encouraged, but not required, to leave small refuge areas uncut (5% of plot area) to provide overwintering habitat for invertebrates. All cuttings must be removed from the field.
- Once established, plots should be mechanically topped, or grazed lightly with sheep each winter.
- Top or spot-spray any undesirable plants, such as nettles, bracken, injurious weeds or invasive non-native species as soon as practically possible to avoid them becoming established.

Inputs and management:

- Applications of organic manures are not permitted.
- Applications of nitrogen and potassium fertiliser are permitted:

- Applications of nitrogen containing inorganic fertilisers are permitted up to a maximum of the recommended amount given for that category of grassland in the AHDB Nutrient Management Guide (RB209), but not to exceed 100kgN/ha per year.
- Maintenance applications of potash are permitted, as per the AHDB Nutrient Management Guide (RB209)
- Grazing by livestock is not permitted, except for light grazing by sheep between 1st November and 28th February inclusive. Supplementary feeding except by energy blocks is not permitted.
- Applications of lime are permitted.
- Pesticide applications are not permitted except for spot-spraying of injurious weeds.

Returning the land to agricultural production at the end of the agreement:

- Terminate and cultivate the grass sward at a time of year when nutrient loss via leaching and/or surface runoff from the bare soil will be minimised (i.e. in spring / summer / early autumn, and when ground conditions are suitable).
- Establish the following crop as early in the autumn as possible:
 - to ensure that the maximum amount of nutrient released by the grass sward is taken up by the following crop/s. This could involve using cover crops to retain nutrients in following winters.
 - to provide maximum over-winter ground cover to reduce surface runoff.

Do not

- Do not use plots for regular vehicular access to other fields.
- Do not apply any organic manures to the reverted area, or prior to its establishment.
- Do not use pesticides, except for herbicides to spot-treat or weed-wipe to control nettles, bracken, injurious weeds or invasive non-native species.
- Do not allow the soil P index to rise during the duration of the agreement.
- Do not graze at any time with any type of livestock, except for light grazing by sheep between 1st November and 28th February inclusive.
- Do not supplementary feed sheep except by energy blocks.
- Once established, do not plough, cultivate or re-seed until the end of the term of the agreement.

Record keeping and claiming payment

Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them with *the payment claim* each year. Payment will only be made upon satisfactory receipt of all of the following records:

- Photographs of the plots before establishment (*only required for first payment claim*).
- Photographs of each reverted area, from which the time and location of the photo can be identified (*submit annually*). The EnTrade app can be downloaded and may be used for this purpose.
- Invoices showing the seed mix used to establish the sward (*only required for first payment claim*).
- Soil analysis results (pH, P and K as a minimum) for the relevant fields dated within the past 3 years (*only required for first payment claim*).
- Farm and field information needed to run a phosphorus loss tool for the farm and calculate the reduction in phosphorus loss to water arising from this work. This will include farm data relating to livestock numbers, crop areas and fertiliser and manure inputs.
- Self-declaration that the terms of the Nature-based Project Agreement have been adhered to (*submit annually, key terms are listed above*).
- Successful applicants are required to sign a declaration *and submit it with each annual payment claim* confirming that:
 - reasonable precautions are taken to prevent nutrients and soil from the relevant field getting into watercourses or from being leached to groundwater to an extent that could cause pollution.
 - the relevant fields have not been (i) the source of a recorded pollution incident which could have been prevented by the farmer taking reasonable precautions to prevent that pollution and/or (ii) the subject of a warning, fine, prosecution or BPS deduction issued to the farmer by the Environment Agency or RPA for a breach of NVZ rules or Farming Rules for Water in the past 5 years.

Agreement holders will need to keep the following records and supply them *on request*:

- Field operations at the field parcel level, including associated invoices



Hay meadow above Blagdon Lake

Additional Information

Championing the Farmed Environment: Advice on reverting arable land to grass - <https://www.cfeonline.org.uk/advice-training/arable-land-reverted-to-grass/>

AHDB Nutrient Management Guide (RB209): <https://ahdb.org.uk/nutrient-management-guide-rb209>