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THE GAME CONSERVANCY TRUST

FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Low-input cereals

ELS HLS

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Spring barley is an ideal crop to use as it generally supports higher numbers of beneficial plants that support insects and provide seeds in the following stubble – both vital food sources for farmland birds.

Low-input cereals are selectively sprayed to allow small populations of broad-leaved plants and associated insects to develop. Management generally involves restricted use of broad-leaved herbicides in the crop and avoiding the use of insecticides, especially after 15 March. There are no restrictions on the use of fungicides or plant growth regulators. There are a number of low-input options available in Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). The HLS options are targeted at areas with rare arable plants or birds such as grey partridges, turtle doves, tree sparrows, cirl buntings or corn buntings.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Low-input cereals boost the abundance of broad-leaved plants in the crop that provide seed food for birds in the subsequent stubble

The objective is to boost populations of broad-leaved plants that have little competitive impact on the crop. This management is ideal for sites with rare arable plants or populations of seed-eating birds.

Low-input cereals boost the number of insects in the crop

Broad-leaved arable plants support a high diversity of insects that do not harm the crop and, in turn, support populations of predatory insects that help to control crop pests. The effect of low-input cereal management is to boost the numbers of beneficial insects in the crop, provided that insecticide use can be avoided after 15 March.

Low-input cereals provide food for young partridges and other farmland birds

Many farmland bird species feed their chicks on insects for the first few weeks. Grey partridge chicks, in particular, forage on the ground within cereal crops that give them shelter, without being too dense to impede their movement or soak them in wet weather. An abundance of insects within the crop is essential for their survival.

Low-input spring cereals provide nesting habitat for skylarks and habitat for spring-germinating arable plants

Spring cereals are beneficial habitats for nesting skylarks and spring-germinating arable plants, some of which are preferred food for birds, such as the polygonums (eg knotgrass).

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

OPTIONS AVAILABLE

Scheme	Option	General description	Advice for maximum benefits
HLS	Reduced herbicide, cereal crop management preceding over-wintered stubble and a spring crop (HF15).	Cereal crop with restricted herbicide use and no pre-harvest desiccant. Stubble maintained until at least 14 February.	Spring barley is the best crop to use (winter barley is better than winter wheat). Avoid using insecticides after 15 March. Retain stubble until the end of March if possible.
HLS	Reduced herbicide, cereal crop management preceding enhanced set-aside (HF18).	Cereal crop with restricted herbicide use and no pre-harvest desiccant. Stubble maintained until at least 15 July.	Spring barley is the best crop to use (winter barley is better than winter wheat). Avoid using insecticides after 15 March.
HLS	Low-input spring cereal to retain or re-create an arable mosaic (HG7).	Spring cereal crop with reduced seed rate, and restricted herbicide and fertiliser applications.	Do not use insecticides. Improved if the stubble is maintained through the winter (combine with the ELS over-wintered stubble option EF6).
ELS	Cereals for whole crop silage followed by over-wintered stubble (EG4).	Cereal crop with restricted herbicide use, no insecticides after 15 March and harvested as whole crop silage. Stubble maintained until at least 15 February.	Spring barley is the best crop to use (winter barley is better than winter wheat). Benefits for nesting birds are limited due to the early harvesting date – not suitable for corn buntings.

HOW CAN I CREATE AND MANAGE A LOW-INPUT CEREAL?

WHERE TO USE LOW-INPUT CEREAL OPTIONS

- This management is only practised when the field contains a cereal crop and may therefore rotate around the arable area.
- Low-input cereal management is most suited to light soils in locations that do not have high weed infestations, or a problem with cleavers or competitive grass weeds.
- Spring barley is the best crop to use as it generally has higher populations of broad-leaved plants and includes species favoured by seed-eating birds, such as the polygonums.

MANAGING LOW-INPUT CEREALS

- It is crucial to try to avoid the use of insecticides on spring cereals, or after 15 March on winter cereals, as these crops are rich sources of insect food for birds. Before using any insecticides, ensure the pest levels have exceeded the economic threshold.
- Following harvest, the stubble management varies between options, but it is always beneficial to leave it undisturbed and ungrazed throughout winter so the seed food is available to birds.

Examples of sprays that are acceptable on low-input cereals:
- All fungicides
- All plant growth regulators
- Cleaver control: amidosulfuron
- Grass weed control: tri-allate, diclofop-methyl, fenoxaprop-p-ethyl, tralkoxydim, clodinafop-propargyl

NB: no pre-harvest desiccant.

- Some farmers prefer to leave a sterile strip around the crop edge to control weeds. If a perennial grass margin is established between the hedge base and the crop then this should not be necessary, but where they are used, they should be placed between the grass margin and the crop.
- The general principle is to avoid the use of broad-spectrum herbicides (only using herbicides to control grass weeds and amidosulfuron if necessary to control cleavers). The exact herbicide regime for HLS options should be agreed with your Rural Development Service adviser, who should also be consulted if a significant weed problem develops.

KEY POINTS

Higher Level Stewardship can fund low-input cereals in areas with rare arable plants or birds such as grey partridges, turtle doves, tree sparrows, corn buntings or cirl buntings.

Low-input cereals are best sown on light arable soils with a diverse range of broad-leaved plants and low populations of cleavers and competitive grass weeds.

Generally, spring barley provides more benefits for birds than winter barley or wheat crops.

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:

RSPB
Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL. Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk/farming

FWAG
Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 024 7669 6699
www.fwag.org.uk

THE GAME CONSERVANCY TRUST
The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF. Tel: 01425 652381
www.gct.org.uk

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The Defra ELS and HLS schemes can fund this type of management. For full details, refer to the scheme handbooks.

ELS = Entry Level Stewardship
HLS = Higher Level Stewardship

See also the RSPB advisory sheets on:
Conservation headlands
Buffer strips on cultivated land
Over-wintered stubble