



## FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

# FARMING *and the environment*

We talk to two farmers whose focus is soil health, and ask how the upcoming Environmental Land Management Scheme will support a way forward for farming that is commercially viable and sustainable

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**W**ith the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) set to roll out in 2024, it looks likely that good soil management will be part of the new system. Arable farming has always incorporated rotations of crops, but there does seem to be a move towards more diversity, more cover crops and, in some instances, including livestock in those rotations.

How this will fit into ELMS is not yet clear, but as David Lord, of Earls Hall Farm on North East Essex coast, says: “We are hoping that ELMS will work together with farming. The old way meant that environmental schemes were seen as completely separate to farming systems. If ELMS complements farming, it might work. It’s too early to say at the moment.” On the steering committee of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, a group of farmers “who have come together to champion a way of farming which is sustainable and good for nature”, David is tentatively hopeful

that the grant system will work with modern farming. David says his father was always keen on as much diversity as possible when it came to cropping. “We really changed our farming practice about six years ago, when we started using the PrimeWest cross slot drill, which allows drilling in untilled land. With our fairly tricky soil, which varies from London clay to very light sand and the increasingly variable weather patterns, we needed a more resilient way to farm.” Today, the farm varies the crops as much as possible, using cover crops to help soil regeneration. “We use radish types for deep roots, vetch for the green manure and phacelia for the surface roots and its ability to attract pollinators. We are now able to include spring cropping in our rotations, which we couldn’t before as the soil was too heavy.” David says that previously, a spring crop would be disastrous – the soil would be too wet and then too dry, and then the weed burden would be too high. “The only thing that is missing from our rotations, and that we’d like to include is livestock,” David

says. They hope to find a sheep grazer near them – but it can be difficult. “We want it to be fairly intensive but for very short periods of time – so that it is grazed hard and fast, and not many graziers are energetic enough for that.”

A farmer who has already included livestock in his rotations is Tim May, of Pitt Hall Farm, near Basingstoke in Hampshire. Tim, who took over the farm in 2004, started including livestock in 2012, after doing a Nuffield Scholarship. He says: “I took a much more holistic management approach to the farm, rather than thinking about each field each season.” The livestock, managed by partner farmers, includes a ‘roaming’ dairy herd, sheep and a pasture egg producer. Tim says the margins are certainly as good as they were when the farm was under more ‘conventional’ rotations, “but we are always waiting for the ‘perfect’ year”. Interestingly, Tim concedes that now he has converted to organic, his attitude to ploughing is shifting again. “It’s made me realise that there can’t be hard and fast rules. You cannot be a farmer if you are dogmatic about farming systems. No till is great, but not always the right choice, and there are so many ways to cultivate a field. I’m doing more ploughing again.”

And this dogma is where he worries about ELMS. “With the Single Farm Payments, no style of farming was discriminated against. If you were a small mixed farm, you got your money, just the same as a huge arable farm. But I doubt ELMS will capture the current complexity of farming, which is something that we should try



David Lord



Tim May



### “YOU CANNOT BE A FARMER IF YOU ARE DOGMATIC ABOUT FARMING SYSTEMS”

to maintain. And the other major problem is that innovation is made much harder. So, for example, when we wanted to apply for a leader grant for a mobile dairy unit, it was impossible. No such equipment was on the list. Or if you want to put in steel fence posts rather than wooden ones, you can’t get a grant. The grant is only for posts that are 3-4 inches, while the steel ones, which of course last much longer, are 2 inches.” Tim’s worries are that, with its formulaic approach, ELMS will exclude innovations, and worse still, will not take into account the varied and innovative approach that is needed for a more holistic and sustainable future for farming.

Certainly, with their complex and diverse range of crop rotations, and with less machinery, less fertiliser, less pesticide and less insecticide, both David and Tim agree. The risk is far lower than with ‘conventional’ style farming, so in a bad year, the farms lose less. The soil is healthier, making the crops healthier and, in the long run, more resilient. 🌱