

## Report on Land Use Changes

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**Summary:** The Land Use Survey has been completed for 2007. The analysis comparing data from 2005 and 2006 has also been completed.

A number of changes have taken place recently which are likely to change land use in the next few years. These include; prices increases, food shortages and variable harvests. Climate change and related energy policy influences will be significant, e.g. the US drive to grow cereals for biofuel. Changes to set aside rules will affect the area under cultivation. These will all change the landscape and habitats of the Chilterns. In light of these changes the Board needs to take a view on these trends and assess the mechanisms available to influence change.

**Purpose of Paper:** To advise the Board of factors currently and likely to influence land use in the next few years, which need to be taken into account in reviewing the AONB management plan.

### **Background**

1. The Board is undertaking an innovative programme of monitoring land use change and has carried out surveys in 2005, 2006 and 2007. The results from 2005 and 2006 have been analysed and published. The main findings were:

Comparisons between the 49 squares surveyed in both 2005 and 2006 showed the following:

1. The largest change in land use was from cropped to uncropped arable land (4.9%). (Uncropped refers to set-aside and arable land out of production under the Single Payment System.)
2. The next most common type of land use change was a switch from arable to agricultural grassland (4.1%) and agricultural grassland to arable (2.6%). This is probably due to normal farm rotations.
3. There appears to have been an increase in land managed for horse grazing and livery stables, largely as the result of conversion of agricultural grassland (2.9%) and arable land (0.8%). However, this result needs to be treated with some caution as in 2006, the surveyors recorded evidence of equestrian activity, whereas in 2005 they only recorded the presence of horses.

4. Wooded land has increased by 0.2%, mainly from creation of small areas of farm woodland on arable and grassland, and the planting of tree belts to landscape large residential properties.
5. Rough unmanaged land (rough grassland and bracken) has increased by 1.1%, primarily from the abandonment of management on agricultural land.
6. Built areas which include gardens, have increased by 0.4%, largely as a result of small areas of grassland and woodland being incorporated into the boundaries of gardens, or more extensive areas being managed as the extended grounds of large residential properties.
7. A total of 924 boundary sections were surveyed in all 105 squares. Of these, 532 (58%) had a hedge. Of the remainder, the principal boundary feature was a fence in 28% of cases, especially in areas of improved agricultural grassland and pony paddocks.
8. Hedgerow condition varied. In terms of continuity, only 18% were described as continuous and in excellent condition. More detail is available from the Hedgerow Survey Report.

### **Conclusions**

2. Some of the changes recorded only affect small areas, and are not apparent in the summary statistics presented in this report; however potential for impact on landscape impact is high.
3. Change in the way farming is subsidised has contributed to the rise in uncropped agricultural land and possibly rough unmanaged land too. Prior to 2005, agricultural support payments were linked to crop production levels or numbers of livestock. In 2005 the Single Payment System removed the link between production and subsidy. Farmers now receive a Single Farm Payment regardless of whether they grow crops or not, providing they keep the land in good agricultural and environmental condition. If the market for cereals and oilseeds is poor, which it until recently, farmers may decide it is not economic to crop the land, hence a rise in the amount of uncropped land. However a rise in the price of wheat/barley/oilseed rape may see this land come back into production.
4. The cessation of production on agricultural land and purchase by non farming landowners has resulted in changes in land use, particularly around settlements. New uses include establishment of small-scale livestock enterprises, pony paddocks and livery, regularly involving the subdivision of large fields into smaller paddocks.
5. The increase in the area of former agricultural land being absorbed into gardens and grounds is very small but can have a significant impact on the character of the village edge, where it most commonly occurs. Features recorded include close-boarded fencing, non native hedges, large areas of

mown lawns and new tree planting, some of which are inappropriate in a rural setting.

6. These findings highlight the importance of engaging with new entrants to land ownership in order to ensure that the natural beauty and character of the Chilterns' landscape is conserved. The Chilterns Landowners' Guide is an important tool in this work.

### **2007 onwards**

7. The results of the survey for 2007 have not been fully analysed yet. Raw data from the 2007 survey suggests that there has been a small increase in arable land which is being cropped, rather than being left as either land out of production or set-aside. There have been few changes in grassland and other categories
8. The most common crop was wheat and percentages of crops grown differ little from last year, except for increases in oats and non food crops such as poppies and borage.
9. The record sheets continue to show evidence of new fencing especially subdividing agricultural fields for horse grazing and new house building/renovation with accompanying landscaping works.
10. As most farming land uses are determined by decisions made in the previous year the issues identified to date are likely to remain prevalent and the trends will have continued.
11. However several factors have changed in 2007 which have the potential to change the landscape of the Chilterns.
12. Grain prices have increased significantly. For example wheat prices are £160 per tonne or higher. This is approximately £100 per tonne higher than only a few years ago. Prices may remain at this higher level.
13. The US has decided not to export grain and maize surpluses; these will be used for the production of biofuels. This has restricted supply within the world market thus driving up prices.
14. Food stocks are at a low level, which has prompted the EU to lift its requirement for at least 5% of land to be put in set aside.
15. Milk prices have increased, partly as a result of increased demand for dairy products in China. This may not result in an increase in dairy herds but it may stem the decline of this sector.
16. Targeting of the agri-environment scheme budgets may restrict the area of land on which Higher Level Scheme applications are successful. HLS agreements attract higher payments for environmental work and those in the scheme may benefit significantly compared to those outside.

17. Land prices remain high and are influenced by general affluence and, for example, city bonuses. This will increase the pressure to sell land for non farming or forestry purposes.
18. After many years of decline the price of timber is rising, which may renew interest in woodland management.
19. The demand for pony paddocks shows no signs of slowing down.
20. The mainstream livestock sector continues to struggle, fuelled by increasing grain prices, hay shortages and foot and mouth disease. However there is an increasing number of smallholdings rearing animals for niche markets
21. These changes have to be considered in the context of:
  - a. Loss of land to non productive uses
  - b. Loss of landscape character due to urbanisation
  - c. Desire to conserve and re-introduce wildlife to farmland
  - d. Lack of management of woodlands
22. The Board needs to take these factors into account in reviewing the management plan and developing policies to conserve and enhance natural beauty. It would be timely to discuss the changes likely to take place and to consider whether and how these changes should be influenced in order to achieve the purposes of designation. For example:
  - Should the plan seek to restrict further the loss of farmland to other uses?
  - How should farming be influenced to maximise environmental benefits given that farming profitability may improve in the next few years?
  - How should the impacts of climate change be incorporated? For example some forecasts suggest that the south of England will no become increasingly unsuitable for sheep farming but will be suitable for a range of new crops?
  - How can environmental benefits be secured when land use changes to a garden, horse paddock or leisure use?
23. Society may well place a higher value on the security of supplies of food and prices than it has done in recent years. There is also unlikely to be significantly increased public funding for agri-environment schemes in the short term. The balance between commodity prices and the value of grant schemes will change to favour commercial activity. Identifying the means to influence land use change will be more important than ever.

### **Recommendation**

- 1. The Board considers likely changes to land use and possible means of influencing those changes which it wishes to be incorporated in the review of the AONB Management Plan.**