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# Centre for Agricultural Strategy

STRATEGIES FOR THE RURAL ECONOMY

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Strategies for the Rural Economy - The RSPB View

Ms Janet Egdell, Rural Economist, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds

Today, we have listened to a range of views on the future of the rural economy. You are probably asking yourselves "What can the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds add?" We are the largest nature conservation organisation in Europe, with over 850,000 members. Our principal objectives are the conservation of wild birds, their habitats and environment. These credentials give us a unique perspective on numerous aspects of the rural economy, from the uses of the land, particularly agriculture and forestry, to the people living and working in or visiting rural areas. For the sake of the overall future of rural areas and for their own sake, none of these rural activities cannot afford to disregard their environmental impact.

Rural areas in the EC are in the process of considerable change, influenced particularly by the changes in agricultural policy and the move to a Single Market. Bearing this in mind, what strategy would the RSPB like to see for the rural economy as we move into the 21st century? Overall, we want a more integrated approach to the rural economy particularly within government, so that forestry and agriculture, rural communities and their development, employment and nature conservation are no longer looked at in isolation from one another. Only by considering the links and potential conflicts within the rural economy will the opportunities for ensuring a sustainable future for rural areas be found.

Agriculture, which dominates over two thirds of land use in the EC, will continue to be one of the major influences on the rural economy and environment. As the importance of food production declines and the political will to reduce the costs of supporting

agriculture increases, the industry's emphasis is being forced to change. The recent agreement on CAP reform can be viewed as one of the steps in this long-running process.

We would like to see agricultural policy in Europe thoroughly greened, not just tinkered with, by truly integrating agriculture and environment policies. The UK government, during its Presidency of the EC starting tomorrow, should ensure the Council's recent commitment to "pursue the requirements of environmental protection as an integral part of the CAP" is followed through. The government should insist that compensation for farm price cuts be conditional on farmers protecting the environment. In this way, the government's own policy of cross compliance can be used to ensure, among other things, that our international obligations to conserve Flora, Fauna, Habitats and Wild Birds are met within agriculture.

The recent reform agreement offers many possibilities for this, such as:

- the positive use of the land set aside from agriculture for habitat re-creation,

- reducing the pressure of overgrazing in the uplands, to allow the recovery of badly damaged vegetation

- and extending the principles of ESAs to much greater areas or "zones".

However, the agreed accompanying measures, the so-called COM 91/415 package needs money attached to it, in order to make all these possibilities a reality. Also, as long as these remain separate from the main agricultural sectors, their effect can only be limited. We urge the UK Presidency to press for these measures to be fully integrated with the arable and livestock sectors, not an add-on attempting to counter the effects of the other policies.

Forestry policy, too, must take nature conservation fully into account. The use of indicative forestry strategies should ensure that:

planting moves down the hill, on to areas of low conservation value;

greater proportions of broadleaves and native species are included;

that novel approaches to structuring and managing forests are encouraged.

Meanwhile, the move to a Single European Market and the prospect of economic and monetary union will increasingly favour the central regions of Europe at the expense of the more peripheral regions. In an attempt to compensate for this, to try and encourage "cohesion" within the EC, more funds are being directed towards the marginal areas in the form of aid for rural development. Such aid must take account of its environmental impact. The current review of the Community's Structural Funds should be used as a chance to make them a positive force in the environment and not, as so often at present, a destructive force.

To summarise, the RSPB would like to see a strategy for the rural economy which takes conservation properly into account. The environmental impacts of agriculture, forestry and rural development policies must be dealt with in an integrated manner. The UK Presidency offers an ideal opportunity for integrating agriculture and environment policies, through the use of cross compliance and the full implementation of the accompanying measures. It also offers, (through the reform of the Structural Funds), an opportunity to integrate rural development and environment policies.

