



ROYAL AGRICULTURAL
SOCIETY *of* ENGLAND

No time for “blame game” as all sides seek to boost farmland bird numbers

Environmental schemes need to be more focused on outcomes and less a case of simply ticking boxes in order to bring about the improvements in wildlife that everyone is trying to achieve.

That was the challenge thrown down to delegates by Defra Minister of State, James Paice at a *Farmland Birds and Sustainable Intensification* seminar staged by the Royal Agricultural Society of England in London. The Seminar brought together farmers, conservationists, scientists and policy makers to debate the issue of how to increase the numbers of birds on British farms.

“Current policies do not appear to be delivering the outcomes we want. The Farmland Bird Index (FBI) is one of the key measures of effectiveness of ELS and HLS and it is recording falling bird numbers.

“But this is not the time to indulge in a blame game. Everyone involved is trying to achieve improvements. We need to be sure that the FBI, as it stands, is the right measurement to use. We need all parties to work together to ensure that environmental schemes are really effective, properly ‘joined up’ and that those operating them are clear about what they are trying to achieve, that there is more rigour on in-field options and that the best advice is available.”

Other speakers at the Seminar supported the Minister’s message. And case studies revealed that where schemes were managed with wild bird outcomes in mind, success had been achieved.

Peter Richards, who farms with his father near Cheltenham, is involved with the South West Farmland Bird Initiative. He entered the Higher Level Scheme in 2008, and now has recorded some 60 species of birds on his farm.

Dr Alastair Leake, Director of Research at the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust’s Allerton Project, also emphasised that bird numbers could be increased while maintaining a high level of arable output. Allerton has demonstrated that an effective programme needs a complementary list of actions including:-

- Provision of suitable nesting habitat;
- Plenty of insects, particularly at chick hatching;
- Feed through the winter, early and late spring;
- Targeted and limited control of predators.

Scientific presentations focussed on the challenge of producing more whilst impacting less, the reasons for farmland bird declines and ways in which Environment Schemes might better help farmers to encourage birds.

“This was a real breakthrough event,” said Denis Chamberlain, RASE Chief Executive. “Bringing together different farmland bird interests under its independent banner was a challenge RASE relished and the result was an excellent debate, a frank and relevant exchange of views. There was a genuine consensus that by working together the flow of better information to farmers about how their participation in environmental schemes can become more out-come oriented could be achieved.

“All sides have much to go away and consider. RASE will produce a report on the seminar and attempt to develop a programme of action which helps achieve those goals.”

- ENDS -

Notes to Editors:-

1. Press release issued by Catherine Stuart, Membership & Communications Executive, Royal Agricultural Society of England

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2. A report of the proceedings of the Farmland Birds and Sustainable Intensification seminar will be available from RASE and will appear on its website
3. The Royal Agricultural Society of England plays a leading role in the development of British agriculture and a vibrant rural economy through the uptake of good science and the promotion of best practice. www.rase.org.uk