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THE GAME
CONSERVANCY
TRUST

FARMING FOR WILDLIFE

Conservation headlands



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Sites for conservation headlands should be chosen carefully so that management will encourage a sprinkling of broad-leaved weeds within the cereal crop

Conservation headlands are headlands of cereal crops that are sprayed selectively to allow small populations of broad-leaved weeds and their associated insects to develop. Headlands should be chosen carefully to avoid encouraging a flush of highly competitive weeds. Management involves avoiding the use of broad-leaved herbicides in the crop, and avoiding the use of insecticides after 15 March. There are no restrictions on the use of fungicides or plant growth regulators. Conservation headlands can be funded by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and some Environmentally Sensitive Areas where they are likely to benefit species such as rare arable plants, insects and key farmland birds.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Conservation headlands allow a sprinkling of broad-leaved plants in the cereal crop margin

Conservation headlands in appropriate places will contain small populations of broad-leaved plants, which have little competitive impact on a crop. This management is ideal for sites with rare arable plant populations, but is also appropriate along field margins in areas with light soils that are unlikely to be infested with highly competitive weeds such as barren brome or cleavers.

Conservation headlands boost insect numbers in the crop margin

Broad-leaved arable plants support a high diversity of insects that do no harm to the crop and, in turn, support populations of predatory insects, which help to control crop pests. Tussocky grass margins provide an ideal over-wintering habitat for many such insects. They move into the crop in the spring and, as a result, need protection from insecticides after 15 March. The overall effect of conservation headland management is to boost the numbers of beneficial insects in the crop margin.

Conservation headlands provide an ideal feeding habitat for partridge chicks and other farmland birds

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

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I SITE AND MANAGE CONSERVATION HEADLANDS?

WHERE TO SITE CONSERVATION HEADLANDS

- The ideal location for conservation headlands is alongside tussocky grass margins or beetle banks that provide over-wintering sites for a wide range of insects.
- Conservation headland management is most suited to light soils in locations that do not suffer from high weed infestations or problems with cleavers or barren brome.
- You should only practise this type of management when the field contains a cereal crop. The aim is to achieve a sprinkling of broad-leaved weeds in the headland and to encourage the insects that live on these.
- If you find that an unexpected infestation of weeds develops, and you cannot control this with selective herbicides, then select a more appropriate location in following years.

MANAGING CONSERVATION HEADLANDS

- The width of a conservation headland can be between 6 and 24 metres. The sprayer boom is switched off when spraying the headland of a cereal crop with any insecticide after 15 March or herbicides that target broad-leaved weeds.
- You should check conservation headlands in February/March, and again in May, for any significant weed problems. If cleavers become a problem then they can be

Acceptable sprays for conservation headlands under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme

All fungicides

All plant growth regulators

Cleaver control: amidosulfuron

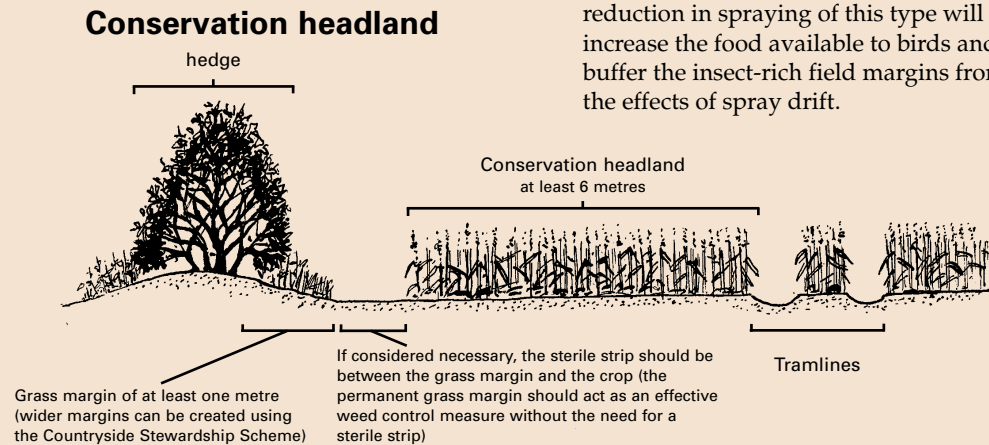
Grass weed control: tri-allate, diclofop-methyl, difenzoquat, flamprop-m-isopropyl, fenoxaprop-ethyl, fenoxaprop-p-ethyl, tralkoxydim, clodinafop-propargyl

selectively treated using amidosulfuron in February or March. If other broad-leaved weeds create a significant problem then you should seek advice from a BASIS trained agronomist and your DEFRA project officer.

- You may prefer to leave a sterile strip around the crop edge to control weeds, although if you establish a perennial grass margin between a hedge base and the crop this should not be necessary. Where you use such strips, however, they should be positioned between the grass margin and the crop.
- Reduced fertiliser use within the conservation headland would benefit the less competitive arable plants and reduce the problem of invasive weeds such as cleavers; although it would also incur a further yield loss. This approach is most appropriate on sites that are home to rare arable plants.

INSECTICIDE USE ON CROP MARGINS

- Even where the placement of conservation headlands is inappropriate due to a high weed burden, you may consider leaving margins unsprayed whenever insecticide is used on a cereal crop after 15 March. A reduction in spraying of this type will increase the food available to birds and buffer the insect-rich field margins from the effects of spray drift.



KEY POINTS

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme and some Environmentally Sensitive Areas can fund conservation headlands in areas frequented by species such as rare arable plants and insects, grey partridges, turtle doves, corn buntings and tree sparrows.

Conservation headlands can boost predatory insect numbers and this helps with pest control.

Avoiding the use of insecticides in cereal headlands is a useful measure where full conservation headland management is not appropriate.

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Payment for some of this management may be available as part of a wider package of work under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and some Environmentally Sensitive Areas. You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



Agricultural Adviser, The RSPB, UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL. Tel: 01767 680551



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, NAC, Stoneleigh, Kenilworth, Warwickshire CV8 2RX. Tel: 024 7669 6699



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