

Organic farming and agri-environmental stewardship schemes in Devon

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Summary

A postal survey was undertaken in North Devon looking at entry into England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) environmental schemes in relation to farming system and markets. The main survey was based in and around the North Devon Biosphere reserve. Significantly more farms replied who had Countryside Stewardship (CSS) agreements than from those who were not in the scheme. There was a greater likelihood of small farms joining CSS as were beef, sheep and cereal farms compared with dairy farms. A greater percent of organic farms had CSS agreements compared with the conventional farms. A smaller telephone survey in a CSS target area in South Devon was also undertaken which confirmed these results. Those farms with CSS agreements were more likely to have joined or be joining the new agri-environmental schemes.

Introduction

The South west of England has the highest number of organic holdings (Lobley, 2005) as well as number of the ERDP's Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) agreements (Defra, 2006). The Countryside Stewardship Scheme though now closed to new entries did involve some changes in farming practises and it has been shown that farmers who are more open to information from a wide range of sources were more likely to adopt a CSS (Mathijs, 2003). The CSS was a competitive scheme and organic farming systems tended to help farmers be accepted; partly due to the fact that organic farming has on average a positive impact on the environment (Shepherd *et al.*, 2003). Organic farmers in Devon have also been found to be much more environmentally aware than conventional farmers in the area (Lobley *et al.*, 2005). A postal survey was undertaken in North Devon and telephone survey in South Devon to substantiate these results. The likelihood of farmers joining the new agr-environmental schemes was also investigated.

Materials and Methods

A postal survey was carried out within and around the area of the UNESCO north Devon Biosphere Reserve. A random sample of 100 farms was sent questionnaires, 50 of whom were known to have CSS agreements. There were three sections to the questionnaire including general holding information/enterprises, CSS details, markets and likelihood of joining the new ERDP environmental schemes. A telephone survey was also undertaken in the parish of Rattery, south Devon, which was a CSS target area due to the proximity to one of the largest colonies of greater

horseshoe bats in western Europe.

Results

There was a 44% response from the postal survey. Of these a significantly greater number (using chi squared test) were from farms with CSS agreements (30 compared with 14 out of 50 from non CSS farms.) On analysis of the postal and telephone survey there was a significantly greater percentage of organic farms compared with the conventional farms that had CSS agreements.

There was a trend for the smallest and largest farms to have joined the CSS especially those that were beef, sheep or cereal farms. The dairy farms in the survey were the least likely to join the schemes. In the telephone survey, 80% of farmers currently with a CSS agreement had joined or were about to join one of the new agri-environmental schemes compared with only 50% of those not in the CSS scheme.

Discussion

Organic farmers in this survey appeared to be much more likely to join the ERDP agri-environmental schemes than conventional farmers, confirming the findings of (Lobley *et al.*, 2005). Of the conventional farmers with a CSS agreement and applying for the new agri-environmental schemes few were considering conversion to organic production methods.

The results indicate that organic farmers are more likely to be ‘embracers’ who actively seek new opportunities such as adoption of agri-environmental schemes. (Lobley *et al.*, 2002)

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all the farmers who so willingly answered the postal and telephone survey.

References

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