



2018 WINNER:
SARAH BEARD

Scheme forces landowners to take out personal loans

Farmers have told of their frustration over late Countryside Stewardship payments, with one being owed £230,000 and others saying their experience with the beleaguered system may put them off applying for future environmental schemes.

Johnny Wake, managing director of Courteenhall Farms in Northamptonshire, was forced to take out a personal loan to cover his costs, after 'massively late payments' impacted cash flow. The arable farmer, whose operation spreads over 850ha, said he believed 'in the principle but not the execution'.

"I do think it is fantastic in principle and I would do it again but we did have massively late payments, well over a year; at one point we were £230,000 out of pocket," said Dr Wake, who lobbied his MP to take action.

"We had to take out a private loan for £80,000 and paid interest on that - and that hurt. Living with the uncertainty made cash flow planning extremely difficult and it was very challenging. We invested 10 per cent of the farm into it as the land was losing money per acre."

Defra secretary Michael Gove accepted faith was dwindling in Countryside Stewardship and pledged to make new payment by results schemes simpler and more efficient.

"I appreciate the strength of those concerns that we in Defra have and have moved as quickly as we can to affirm that not only will there be no abandonment of the environmental principles that we've adopted in

our time in the EU but indeed we aim to strengthen environmental protection measures and to create new mechanisms to incentivise environmental improvement," Mr Gove said.

But NFU deputy president, Guy Smith, said Defra needed to do more to restore farmers' faith in the schemes. He stated: "No one seems to deny the administration of the Countryside Stewardship scheme has been unacceptably bad and this has caused a critical lack of confidence in the schemes leading to poor uptake. It is imperative that Defra give this issue the resource and attention to get things back on track."

Despite his issues with the Countryside Stewardship scheme, Dr Wake admitted he would never have been able to afford to plant new hedgerows, put down new tracks across the farm and make other major improvements.

Going forward he said: "You have to have some faith that the Government are going to make something work."

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