

# Hedge fund - why it is time to think again about hedgerows

Recently added as a Sustainable Farming Incentive standard, the humble hedgerow is now being heralded as a beacon of biodiversity and carbon capture. **Jane Thynne** reports.

Writing in the recently published *Environmental Improvement Plan*, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak championed the role the hedgerow plays in farm life.

He also explained how farmers could play their part in hedgerow health via a range of incentives to 'reward farmers for their stewardship of our countryside'.

A new hedgerow standard had in fact been announced just weeks before as part of Defra Secretary Theresa Coffey's upgraded Sustainable Farming Incentive package for 2023. Its inclusion was taken as a sign that the Government sees the creation, restoration and management of hedgerows as a priority.

## Protecting

So why after years of standing in the shadow of copious tree planting schemes has the humble hedgerow been given its place in the sun?

The answer, according to Pippa Chapman, professor of biogeochemistry at the University of Leeds, who with Dr Sofia Biffi, Dr Richard Gratson and Prof Guy Ziv have authored a study - *The Impact of Hedges Maturation on Soil Organic Carbon Stocks in Agricultural Landscapes* - is down to a raft of recent reports which have brought to the fore the fundamental role hedgerows play in protecting and enhancing the environment.

“Basically if you plant hedgerows, you increase the carbon storage in both the above ground biomass and in the soil

PROF PIPPA CHAPMAN

“Hedgerows are high diversity, linear features that accumulate carbon in both their woody biomass and soil,” said Prof Chapman.

“Namely, mitigating climate change and flood alleviation while at the same time restoring biodiversity to agricultural landscapes.”

Their efficacy has also been acknowledged by the UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC).

Its findings, published in 2019, stated that in order to achieve net zero, hedgerow length would need to increase by 40 per cent, which is the equivalent, according to Prof Chapman, of more than 200,000km across Great Britain - 'half of the road system'.

A later report by Natural England - *Favourable Conservation Status* - went even further, recommending an increase of 60 per cent



Farming with Nature

## Hedge facts

■ In England, just over 5,200km of hedges were planted within agri-environment schemes (Environmental and Countryside Stewardships) between 2004 and 2022. More than 90 per cent of this planting happened around improved grassland and arable fields

■ Dr Biffi stated that there had been a rapid increase in planting rates in recent years and total planting more than doubled in 2019-2022 compared to 2004-2018  
 ■ The highest planting rate of 1,300km was achieved in 2022

if the UK was to benefit from full biodiversity gains of this once rural staple.

According to Prof Chapman, the hedgerow's potential for farmers is wide-ranging.

“Basically if you plant hedgerows, you increase the carbon storage in both the above ground biomass and in the soil,” she said.

“And we are talking considerable

gains - increases of around 40 tonnes of carbon per hectare in both. If that is then scaled up it will go a long way to enabling a farm reach its net zero target. It will help to reduce emissions or if a farm business is looking at off-setting carbon emissions, hedgerows will certainly help with that.”

Report co-author Dr Biffi added: “Our estimations show that a

40 per cent increase in hedgerow length across England will result in 4.7 per cent of present-day agricultural CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from agriculture being sequestered each year for four decades.

“This figure could rise to 6.4 per cent by increasing hedgerow width from 1.5m to 2m.”

## Flood alleviation

Prof Chapman said there are benefits too in terms of flood alleviation and run-off.

“If planted correctly, along a slope, for example, hedgerows can intercept run-off, which protects waterways and again provides benefits for the wider community.

They also provide shade for livestock during the summer months and shelter during winter.”

Wider nature is also given a major boost as a comprehensive network of hedgerows provides ‘a corridor’ along which birds, animals and insects can establish habitats, while a variety of plant species aid pollination, further enhancing the natural environment.

“Hedgerows provide a natural corridor for mammals to live under, a home to many plant species and even act as a night-flight guiding system for bats,” said Dr Biffi.

“They are or should be seen as a vital part of the landscape.”

## WHAT FARMERS WILL BE PAID

IT seems the Government may be listening to industry on the value of hedgerows.

For 2023, the Countryside Stewardship (CS) capital grant for hedgerow planting doubled from £11.60 to £22.97 per metre. While under the terms of the new hedgerow SFI standard, farmers will be able to claim £3 per 100m to assess and record hedgerow condition while maintaining existing hedgerow trees, or establishing new ones (so there is an average of at least one hedgerow tree per 100m), will now earn you £10 per 100m.

There is also £989 per year available for the completion of an integrated pest management (IPM) assessment and the development of an IPM plan, as well as other incentives to boost flora, introduce companion crops and reduce pesticides.

Alongside these measures, the new standard has expanded eligibility: for example, farmers will be able to enter hedgerows which are less than 10m wide (instead of less than 5m wide) as

required by CS. Earth or stone-faced banks with woody growth can now also be included opening up areas such as Cornwall or Devon.

## Field size

And as Dr Biffi pointed out, farmers should not worry about productivity, as in England there is plenty of scope to plant hedgerows without needing to reduce field size.

She said: “The total length of arable and improved grassland field boundaries is almost one million km, so planting 40 per cent more hedgerows would only represent 10 per cent of these field boundaries.”

Prof Chapman added: “There is a benefit for farm business in all manner of ways. We have the capacity to plant more hedgerows or manage gapping or generally just maintain them in a useful way. And no one is better placed than farmers to look after these valuable assets. For farmers, undertaking planting, repairing and maintenance of hedgerows really is a win win.”

## BIODIVERSITY BENEFITS

ACCORDING to the RSPB, the UK lost 50 per cent of its hedgerows in the years following World War Two as the need for food production became agriculture's primary function.

Dr Biffi said: “The way the land has been farmed has meant that we have lost so much biodiversity on farmland and many kilometres of hedgerows. An intensively farmed landscape does not create much opportunity for biodiversity.

“Luckily, over the past couple of decades, people have begun to once more appreciate the worth of what was once an accepted and common part of the rural world.”

## Goal

And planting efforts have been increasing rapidly. But, as Dr Biffi noted, those rates need to increase further - 7,000km of hedgerows a year - if the UK was to achieve the Climate Change Committee (CCC) goal by

2050. At current planting rates, Dr Biffi said it would take more than 100 years to reach the CCC target.

A daunting task, but it is one that farmers should certainly consider undertaking.

Farmer and conservationist Joe Stanley is also head of training and partnerships at environmental farming body the Allerton Project in Leicester.

He said that for most farm businesses in England at least,

planting hedgerows makes perfect sense.

“Hedgerows epitomise the notion of public money for public goods,” said Mr Stanley.

“Alongside the practical on-farm and carbon capture benefits, the Government has now recognised their worth and has tried to incentivise the action. Most importantly, there should be some reward for those who have consistently cared for and maintained their hedgerows.”