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 Innovation Plan, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak championed the role the hedgerow plays in farmland.

He 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 Therese Coffey’s upgraded Sustainable Farming Incentive package for 2023. Its inclusion was taken as a sign that the Government sees the creation, restoration, and improvement 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 Pipa Chapman, professor of biogeochemistry at the University of Leeds, who with Dr Sofia Biffi, Dr Richard Gratton and Prof Guy Zoi have authored a study – ‘The Impact of Hedges Maturity on Soil Organic Carbon 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.

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

Another major climate change and flood alleviation while at the same time removing 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 90 per cent, which is the equivalent, according to Prof Chap, 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 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 hedges, 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 in net zero target. It will help to reduce emissions or if a farm business is looking at offsetting 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 CO2 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.

“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 Spar 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 £699 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 then 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 - much to the need for food production became agriculture’s primary function.

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

Goal
As000 planting efforts have been increasing rapidly. But, as Dr Biffi noted, those rates need to increase further. “If we are to double hedgerow 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 Leicestershire.

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.”