

Europe's hay meadows in decline - what are we losing and what can we do?

A test case for EU agriculture and biodiversity policy

European Parliament, Brussels, 8 November 2012

Script for Rebecca Barrett's presentation

1	Good morning. My name is Rebecca Barrett and I work in England within a large upland area called the North Pennines.
2	This is one of a number of special landscapes in the country that have been designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
3	The North Pennines is in the north of England, close to the border with Scotland. I am going to spend the next few minutes explaining what has happened to our hay meadows over the past 70 years and some of the lessons we have learned from this.
4	The hay meadows found in the North Pennines are a special type that occur in hilly or mountainous areas across Europe and are known as 'mountain' or 'upland' hay meadows. This type of meadow is listed on Annex 1 of the Habitats Directive. Within an English context, the meadows in the North Pennines are distinctive for two reasons: first, they support a very high diversity of different plants and second, the particular grouping of plant species found in them is unique.
5	Upland hay meadows are only found in the north of the United Kingdom and the vast majority of them are found in the Pennines in the north of England.
6	Sadly they are now very rare. In the whole of the UK there now remain only 900ha of upland hay meadows. 350ha of this is found in the North Pennines where I live and work. But upland hay meadows have not always been this rare. 100 years ago they would have been widespread throughout hilly areas in Britain. What has happened?
7	For us in Britain it is a familiar story. After the Second World War farming and agriculture changed rapidly with the introduction of tractors. As each decade passed the machines got larger, faster and more efficient.
8	Even in comparatively remote upland areas like the North Pennines, farming is now a highly mechanised business. With machines and mechanisation comes intensification. The use of chemical fertilisers means the grass grows faster. This in turn means it can be cut earlier, before the flowers have had a chance to set their seeds. The ability to wrap the newly cut vegetation and to make silage means that there is no longer a need to turn and dry the vegetation in the field. The wildflowers traditionally associated with an upland meadow cannot survive under this type of intensive farm management.
9	Modern, intensive farming has led to the loss of almost all of our hay meadows. Once common flowers are now rare and as they have disappeared so has much of our other wildlife. Bumblebees, butterflies and bats.... swallows, swifts and grasshoppers – we are losing them all.
10	In 1988 an agri-environment scheme called the Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme was introduced to the North Pennines. In return for financial payment, the farmers who chose to enter the scheme were required to manage their meadows in a traditional way. This meant, in particular, that they had to cut the grass after the 8 th of July to let the flowers set seed, they had to make hay rather than silage and they were not allowed to increase the amount of fertiliser they were using.
11	Most of the farmers in the North Pennines chose to enter the scheme. The result of this is that the tradition of hay making has survived in this area as part of the living, working farmed landscape. This is an important element of success of the scheme. Why is it important?
12	Because people value hay meadows. They are a tremendously significant part of the

	cultural landscape and are richly evocative places. Young people love them for their colour and life and older people for the sense of shared experience and community spirit that working in them has generated.
13	Our meadows are also incredibly important for wildlife and biodiversity. The huge diversity of flowering plants creates not only a wonderful colourful display but provides a rich supply of nectar and pollen for creatures like bumblebees.
14	Our meadows are also home to wildlife that has disappeared from much of the rest of the country where farm management is more intensive. Creatures like the lapwing, the water vole and the black grouse. All of these were once found throughout England but now can only survive in places where traditional farming persists.
15	Hay meadows provide other important ecosystem services on behalf of society. Low intensity grassland management conserves soils, protects water quality, stores carbon and supports vital invertebrate pollinators.
16	Hay meadows, the wildlife they support and the ecosystem services they provide are all dependent on low-intensity, traditional farm management. Without the farmers, they would no longer exist.
17	Although our first agri-environment scheme was successful in maintaining the hay making tradition in the North Pennines, there is evidence that the meadows have continued to decline in quality and have been losing their characteristic plant species. This is likely to be because too much fertiliser had been added to the meadows before the scheme started and, in some cases, this was allowed to continue during the scheme.
18	We were concerned by the loss of plant species that had occurred in the meadows, so in 2006, the North Pennines AONB Partnership set up a project to harvest seed from flower-rich meadows and spread it on fields that have lost their key plants.
19	We have run this project in conjunction with a new, more flexible agri-environment scheme called Environmental Stewardship which began in 2005.
20	Through this project we have worked closely with farmers and this has helped us to understand their opinions and aspirations. This is what we have found: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They want to farm • They are happy to modify their behaviour in response to agri-environment schemes • They are proud of what they produce, both in agricultural terms and ecologically.
21	England has a 25 year history of running agri-environment schemes. Looking at this from a local, North Pennines perspective, what have we learned?
22	Farmers need to be involved at all stages in developing and implementing agri-environment schemes. Management measures will always work better and be followed more closely if they are understood and supported.
23	A well-funded monitoring and review programme is essential to the long-term success of a scheme. This should enable changes to be made to schemes in response to results and should include ongoing feedback to the farmers who are delivering the scheme.
24	We see that society is placing a great environmental responsibility in the hands of comparatively few farmers. The future of our meadows and all that they provide for society lies with them. We must engage more closely with them and find out what their needs and aspirations are.
25	But, as effective as agri-environment schemes can be, are they enough in special places such as this, where so much is being delivered by so few?
26	We believe that in addition to flexible agri-environment schemes, other types of special support are needed, an upland hay meadow supplement, for example. These new mechanisms must recognise more fully the tremendous contribution that these high nature value farming systems make to society and the environment. If steps can be taken to address this, our meadows really will have a bright future.
27	Thank you very much for listening.