

Combining Agri-Environment Schemes For Environmental And Financial Benefit - Tir Gofal And Organic Farming

Will John of the Organic Advisory Service/Gwasanaeth Cyngori Organig talks to Peter Davies, a farmer who has diversified and fully embraced agri-environment schemes as a means of maintaining a commercially viable farm business.

Peter Davies farms 750 acres in the Vale of Glamorgan. The farm supports a herd of suckler cows and a flock of sheep while arable crops are grown for sale off the farm and for on farm livestock feed. The farm is situated on the Glamorgan Heritage Coast, an area noted for its landscape and environmental interest. The farm started conversion in 1999 and will complete conversion in 2004. The majority of the land will however have completed conversion in 2001. It was accepted into the Tir Gofal whole farm agri-environment scheme in 2000.

WJ What made you decide to alter your farming system to include Organic Farming and Tir Gofal?

PD Economics were obviously important. Changing my farming system to incorporate both Tir Gofal and organic farming had to be worthwhile financially. I did a lot of research and planning to ensure that the changes to the farm would be worthwhile in the long term.

Having said that I have found that changing my farming system has been immensely enjoyable and a real challenge. I am also aware that this type of farming, benefiting the environment, is responding to public's demands. I am sure that people would rather see subsidies paid to encourage extensive, environmentally sustainable forms of farming than to intensive agri-businesses.

WJ The Tir Gofal scheme offers payments for managing existing habitats as well as creating new ones. What are the main management options you have taken on the farm?

PD I have entered into a ten year agreement and receive payments for growing unsprayed spring cereals, unsprayed roots and leaving winter stubbles. I also manage areas of semi-natural grassland and will create streamside corridors and woodland. I am allowing public and educational

access to areas of the farm. The capital works programme will enable me to restore walls and hedges.

WJ How did these changes in management affect your organic farming practices?

PD The Tir Gofal scheme was carefully planned around my wish to farm organically. I have had to reduce livestock numbers and maintain a good balance of cattle and sheep. Record keeping and paperwork has increased while attitudes to animal health have had to change. As routine use of veterinary products are not allowed I have had to amend my management practises to try to reduce their use. We now only treat animals when absolutely necessary.

One of the most important areas I identified as needing attention was that of rotation planning. Given the number of arable options within Tir Gofal it was essential that time and thought was given to developing a sustainable arable rotation. Arable options should be realistic as of course you will need to be able to rotate the cropping ground around the farm. This can easily be forgotten at the application stage.

WJ Many people would be worried about the reduction in livestock numbers and crop yields, and the effect this will have on the farm business. How have you found the conversion period financially?

PD Yields have definitely come down during the first two years of conversion, which is to be expected. This, coupled with the need to invest in some new machinery, has meant that the conversion period has been quite difficult financially. Payments from the National Assembly for Wales's Organic Farming Scheme have obviously helped, as will the Tir Gofal payments when they arrive. However when all the land becomes organic we hope the farm will start making a good profit. I should stress that the profitability of the business will still be dependant on there being no major changes to conventional support schemes such as AAPS, suckler cow premium, etc. These schemes remain an important source of income to organic producers.

WJ In summary then your change to organic husbandry, coupled with a whole farm agri-environment scheme such as Tir Gofal will benefit your farm enterprise in the long term. Have you any words of encouragement or caution for farmers considering such an important change to their farming system?

PD I have no regrets about making a major change to my farming system. I have found the change in management thoroughly enjoyable although I have to admit that it has been a challenge and I have had a steep learning curve to follow.

I think the most important point is to carefully plan your organic system in advance. Do not offer unrealistic applications to Tir Gofal as it may compromise your organic system, particularly the arable options.

Given the current plight of conventional farming, combining organic farming with an agri-environment scheme such as Tir Gofal offers a real opportunity for farmers such as myself to survive.

For Further Information: The National Assembly for Wales offers farmers considering conversion up to one and a half free days of advice under the Organic Conversion Information Service (OCIS). Telephone the OCIS helpline on 01970 622100 for further details.

Ongoing conversion planning help is available to farmers in certain parts of Wales. Contact the Organic Farming Centre in Aberystwyth for further details. The helpline number is 01970 622100.

The Organic Advisory Service can be contacted at 01488 657600 or OAS in Wales on 01656 880842.

Tir Gofal is administered by The Countryside Council for Wales (CCW). For further details of this scheme farmers in Wales should call CCW on 01248 672500.

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