

Supporting guidance for Retention of Winter Stubbles for Wildlife and Water Quality

This is an old version of the page

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To see recent changes to this guidance, [check the bottom of the page](#).

Introduction

This [option](#) encourages farmers to keep stubbles unploughed until early spring. Only cereal or oil-seed crops are eligible. Legumes and similar protein crops are ineligible due to their nitrogen-fixing properties.

Over-wintered stubbles are a good way of reducing soil erosion risk and provide winter food and cover for farmland birds.

Research suggests that 10 to 20 per cent of arable land should be left as late-ploughed stubble. For example, the skylark population has been shown to decline if the proportion of overwintered stubble in the landscape drops below 10 per cent.

Wildlife benefits

Stubbles have traditionally been one of the most important sources of seed food for farmland birds over the winter. Spilt grain and weed seeds are vital for the winter survival of birds such as tree sparrows, corn bunting and yellowhammer.

Stubbles can also attract large flocks of finches and skylarks. Winter cropping has reduced the amount of stubble available and better weed control has reduced the number of seeds available within the remaining stubbles.

Retaining a proportion of arable land in late-ploughed stubbles will benefit farmland birds.



Winter stubble – © Paul Chapman, SAC Consulting

Water quality benefits

Bare soils and winter crops are generally more prone to soil erosion than winter stubbles.

This is particularly the case on steeply sloping ground on erodible soils. Retaining winter stubbles is a good way of reducing the risk of soil run-off and protecting water quality.

If you are undertaking this option to address diffuse pollution risks, or to benefit fresh water pearl mussel, we will assess whether the option has been sited in an appropriate location.

Field choice and management

- all fields left in over-wintered stubble will benefit wildlife. Fields adjacent to tall hedges, wild bird crops and grass margins will provide a greater range of habitat and be especially attractive to farmland birds
- where this option is used to benefit water quality, the focus should be on sloping fields with light soils because they are more vulnerable to erosion, particularly where watercourses are present
- leave the field uncultivated until 1 March
- barley stubbles (especially spring barley) tend to be better for birds than stubbles of other crops
- the conservation value of the stubbles will be affected by the weed control you have carried out in the preceding crop. Where possible, the use of herbicides in the preceding growing season should be reduced, especially in fields with light soils and a low burden of undesirable weeds
- the use of pre-harvest desiccants has been shown to reduce the value of stubbles to farmland birds in the following winter. This option is not eligible where desiccants are used

Further information

Further information can be found in [Managing Arable Farmland for Wildlife](#) (Scottish Natural Heritage).

Recent changes

| Section | Change | Previous text | New text |
|--|---|--|--|
| Introduction | Additional information on which crops are eligible. | This option encourages farmers to keep stubbles unploughed until early spring. | This option encourages farmers to keep stubbles unploughed until early spring. Only cereal or oil-seed crops are eligible. Legumes and similar protein crops are ineligible due to their nitrogen-fixing properties. |
| Water quality benefits | Additional information on water quality benefits. | - | If you are undertaking this option to address diffuse pollution risks, or to benefit fresh water pearl mussel, we will assess whether the option has been sited in an appropriate location. |

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