

# Federation of Cumbria Commoners

18<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Mr Poul Christensen CBE  
Chair,  
Natural England,  
Foundry House,  
3 Millsands,  
Riverside Exchange,  
Sheffield,  
S3 8NH

Dear Mr. Christensen,

The Federation of Cumbria Commoners was set up in early 2003 to be a representative voice to support and protect the commoners of Cumbria. We are a membership organisation and are open to all local commoners' associations and commoners in Cumbria with affiliate members in Lancashire and Northumberland. We currently have nearly 700 members, the majority of whom are signed up to agri-environment agreements both on commons and their sole occupancy land.

You may be aware the Rural Payments Agency have been asked to identify areas on the Rural Land Register which are deemed to be Permanently Ineligible Features (PIFs) and Natural England is required to remove these from the area of existing ELS/HLS agreements. We have found this action has two main consequences for our members:

- **Reduction in the value of the agreement, along with forced changes to management options:** the area taken up by PIFS reduces the area of the HLS options and value of the agreement. Furthermore, in many cases this reduction moves the agreement below the points threshold for ELS. For the agreement to remain valid points have to be found elsewhere. This sometimes is not easy and graziers find themselves agreeing to new management options (some may incur extra costs) to ensure that their collective agreement stays in line.
- **Delays in payment of AE monies to the grazier:** payments are resumed after these changes are negotiated and agreed. This can take a considerable length of time and cause cash flow problems and hardship. In particular, this year's hard winter and late spring has meant that many graziers have incurred extra feed costs. They were relying on prompt receipt of their AE payments to pay their bills, but this was not to be the case. We know of a young hill farmer with one pedigree Angus cow and plans

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to build up a small herd. He had to sell his only heifer calf this spring to pay his feed bills owing to the fact that his AE payment was late.

We would like to express our disappointment that the above has occurred and we wonder if the delay in payments is necessary at all. In all the cases we have heard about the area of PIFs has been very small with a minor reduction in the overall value of the AE scheme. For example removing PIFs from a common in Lancashire equated to an annual reduction of £263.05 in an HLS/UELS agreement worth £41,074.50 per annum, but it took over three months to get this sorted and payments resumed; on another common PIFs make up 3.04ha of a 4800 ha common, but again it took months for payment to be resumed. In our opinion delaying payment while sorting out minor changes due to PIFs in an agreement is disproportionate, unfair and causes hardship. NE should have considered alternatives to holding up of payments including;

- 1) Given most reclaims are small - a part payment of 95% of the total value could have been made while the points to ensure a valid agreement were getting sorted
- 2) Honour the contracts and pay what they said they would. It is not the commoner's fault that NE didn't sort out the PIFs before cross checking the agreements.

Some of these cases have now been resolved and payments are being made but PIFS are still causing problems for our members. I would be most grateful if you could review payment arrangements and if you require any further evidence or technical information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Administrator  
Federation of Cumbria Commoners