A Northumberland estate, where the quality of the ground and botany was deteriorating due to overgrazing, used a change in tenancy to prioritise environmental objectives in some of its upland farming operations. The revised regimes are being monitored by a nearby university. **John Cresswell** outlines the thinking behind the change

Time for a change

Some visitors to the College Valley on the northern edge of the Cheviot Hills may think it is a place where nothing ever changes. They could not be more wrong. Land use is changing all the time, and it is about to change again – for the better. First, some background: Sheep numbers in the valley began to rise sharply about 200 years ago, driven by prices and supported by enclosure and innovations such as clostridial vaccination and liming, which meant upland ground could carry more stock than before.

Techniques were developed to hold stock on the highest ground all through the year – breeding selection, hefting (acclimatising the sheep to the area) and fencing. This meant that in the month of February the shepherds and their families had to stay in places that were far from hospitable, such as Mount Hooley, Coldburn, Fleehope, Goldscleugh and Dunsdale, developing resilience similar to that of their stock.

These changes occurred for economic reasons. It was possible to employ a shepherd at Mount Hooley to look after 300 ewes on the Cheviot because sheep and wool prices were high, while labour costs were low. As prices fell and costs rose over the past 50 years, the government stepped in with subsidies to keep the system going. Over the past 20 years, there has been a shift in the public policy mindset on upland areas. Why should the taxpayer help to hold stock numbers on the hill?

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It could hardly be justified in terms of food security: large areas of hill still only produced a small number of light lambs, to be fattened elsewhere. The system preserved some jobs, but these were low paid and arduous. And these arguably meagre benefits came at the cost of plant life. High year-round stocking levels tend to favour robust, competitive plants such as bents and fescues at the expense of more delicate types such as saltwort, limestone bedstraw and brittle bladder fern.

Changing objectives

Some birds (pied wagtail, carrion crow, jackdaw and goldfinch) thrive on well-grazed uplands; many traditional upland species (skylark, wheatear, whinchat, yellow wagtail and yellowhammer) do not. As for the landscape, trees cannot re-establish themselves on intensively grazed river banks. The payment regime changed entirely. Instead of farmers being paid per animal, payments would only be made by the acre, and then only in return for looking after the land.

In the College Valley, the number of resident shepherds fell and by 1998 the last one had left the southern part of the estate. Stock management was now carried out by teams of people living some distance away.

None of this addressed three central facts: the management of the 2,225ha at the top of the estate was driven almost exclusively by farming; little profit was being made despite subsidy; and the environmental condition of the area was not what it could be. This place is really special. Yet assessment of the botany of the Cheviot Site of Special Scientific

Interest over many years has repeatedly deemed its status to be 'unfavourable'.

The dominance of farming has held back other objectives, and in the view of the College Valley Estate board of directors this had to change. In late 2012, the estate had the opportunity to bring to an end the agricultural tenancy of the Goldscleugh area.

Environment and regeneration

The board decided that land management on the estate would now be driven by environmental objectives. This did not mean there would be no farming – far from it – but it meant farming would support environmental efforts, rather than the other way round. We concluded that the main reason for the unfavourable changes in the botany was that the sheep stayed on the ground for 12 months a year. For example, vascular plants in sheltered areas were trampled as the animals sought refuge in poor weather.

We would also like to see the regeneration of trees such as alder and downy birch along edges of watercourses, and reduced winter grazing should help this. We had an opportunity to move the hefted stock to a nearby estate in September 2012. Some important plant and bird species depend on grazing, so locally sourced sheep and cattle would be brought on to the land in the spring, then moved at the start of winter.

Intensive monitoring of the botany began in 2012, with the help of experts from the University of Lancaster. A subsidiary programme run by the University of Newcastle is being set up to monitor the cattle grazing pattern, using radio collars. This will give the information needed to make appropriate alterations to stocking. Moving animals on with the start of spring and off before winter: not so different from land management in the area some 200 years ago.

We are confident that the changes will be positive. If monitoring reveals that they are not having the effects that we wish, we will make appropriate adjustments. Goldscleugh is only 40% of the estate. What of the rest? We have no desire to implement the same 'environment first' policy over the northern part of the estate. Hethpool and Elsdonburn are more productive agriculturally and less valuable environmentally – and they are occupied by two farming tenants who are adept at integrating environmental benefits with their businesses.

So, what do we hope for after a couple of decades? We do not expect different plants, but we hope to encourage those now just hanging on. We hope to see more birds and more diversity of bird species. Native trees might start to thrive along the watercourses and straths of the Lambden Burn.

We hope all this will happen, while the company remains profitable and satisfies its partners in Natural England and the National Park that it is fulfilling its obligations in managing this very special area. We will not get everything right first time, but I am confident we are going in the right direction.

Vital link

The conclusions of the government's *Foresight report on the future of food and farming* and the *State of nature* report are both uncomfortable and inextricably linked. However, the food security issue must not overshadow a need to modify some land management practices to enhance ecosystems that provide a range of services vital to both farming and biodiversity within a thriving and viable countryside.
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Further +info

Related competencies include **Agriculture, Management of the natural environment and landscape, Sustainability**