

# WEALD MEADOWS INITIATIVE

## 1996 - 1999 SET UP REPORT



Action for valued grasslands, for now and for the future



The Weald Meadows Initiative is a unique public private partnership between the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Unit, Farming and Wildlife Group (FWAG) and Agrifactors (Southern) Ltd. It is supported by English Nature, the Countryside Agency, Defra-Rural Enterprise Scheme, Heritage Lottery Fund, EU Community Leader+ (EAGGF) fund and the Sigrid Rausing & Dennis Curry

REPORT FOR THE PERIOD 1996-1999 AT THIS TIME:

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## SUMMARY

The Weald Meadows Initiative partnership has aimed, over the last three years, to tackle the loss of unimproved meadows in the High and Low Weald. During this period it has successfully established itself as a centre of expertise with landowners and countryside advisors, and has provided an effective and comprehensive advisory service.

Recognising the importance of adequate financial support to continue the traditional management of meadows the Initiative has successfully lobbied for the countryside stewardship scheme to target meadow sites and established a mechanism of harvesting local wildflower seed as a means of generating an additional income from the resource.

The profile of wildflower grassland in the Weald has been raised to the extent that by the year 2001 it is expected that all wildflower grassland sites will have been identified and landowners contacted with preliminary advice. It is expected that almost half of these sites will be under appropriate management with the costs of management part supported by either the countryside stewardship scheme and/or income from the sale of seed. Expansion of the resource has been achieved by proactively promoting and advising on the creation and enhancement of species rich grassland.

The Initiative has assisted local contractors to diversify their operations into the environmental field thereby supporting rural employment. It has also equipped landowners with the necessary knowledge and skills to manage their land in an environmentally responsible way.

## BACKGROUND

### The Policy Context

The Weald Meadows Initiative has been developed within the context of a range of European, national and local policy relating to biodiversity, protected landscapes, wildlife designations and rural and agricultural development. It is particularly useful in supporting and encouraging activity under agri-environment schemes approved by agri-environment regulation 2078/92 and long term is likely to be valuable in supporting new schemes as they are developed.

### The Issues

The Weald Meadows Initiative was set up to identify and set up mechanisms by which the following issues could be addressed at a local level:-

#### *Issue 1 - Loss of unimproved wildflower grassland*

Wildflower meadows, although scarce, hold a significant proportion of the biodiversity of the High and Low Weald Natural Areas with unimproved grassland containing a minimum of 60 wildflower and grassland species and associated insects, as compared to improved grassland with an average of 5 wildflower and grass species. Around 95% of wildflower meadows have been lost, both nationally and locally, over the last 50 years and those that remain continue to be under threat from change of use or lack of appropriate management.

#### *Issue 2 - Unsuccessful meadow creation/enhancement projects*

The creation of wildflower meadows from an area as small as 25m<sup>2</sup> to anything up to 8 hectares is an increasingly popular activity amongst gardeners, farmers and landowners and could significantly increase the wildflower grassland habitat of the High and Low Weald thereby achieving national and local grassland biodiversity targets. Unfortunately, due to a lack of expertise and understanding of the processes involved in establishing wildflower grassland most projects fail.

### *Issue 3 - Limited supply of plants and seeds of native origin<sup>1</sup>*

Natural Areas are ecologically distinct areas defined by English Nature and determined primarily by physical factors such as geology, soils, topography and climate. The wildflowers which grow in these areas are genetically adapted to their particular conditions.

There is an increasing use of non-native origin wildflowers in habitat creation and enhancement schemes, often linked to road and housing development. This is leading to an erosion in the local genetic variability of native plants and a loss of biodiversity.

In recognition of this concern use of native origin wildflowers seed of local origin is increasingly being specified by ecologists. Local native origin seed is better suited and adapted to local environmental conditions than introduced wildflowers. However the availability of such seed is currently limited to a handful of suppliers.

In many instances national policy makes no specific reference to the importance of native origin plants and seed in achieving biodiversity targets. However, working with and funded by government, a national organisation known as Flora Locale is currently playing a key role in addressing the issues of the promotion, development, sale and use of native origin plants and seed, visit them at [www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org)

### *Issue 4 - Declining rural employment*

The re-structuring of agriculture within the High Weald has led to a decline in the agricultural workforce with resulting unemployment within certain sections of local communities and the gradual loss of traditional rural skills. The need to support rural employment and communities is therefore a high priority amongst rural development and conservation organisations in the area.

## **THE WEALD MEADOWS INITIATIVE**

### **1. PROJECT AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS**

#### *1.1 Aims*

The primary aim of the initiative is to conserve and enhance the un-improved and semi-improved meadows of the High and Low Weald through the development of partnerships with local landowners and agricultural contractors and the demonstration of practical solutions to meadow management and creation.

#### *1.2 Objectives*

The Initiative aims to:-

**Increase the income from meadows to help encourage appropriate management by their owners and help secure their future as part of the whole farm enterprise**

- promote agri-environment schemes including the countryside stewardship scheme as a source of grant support;
- provide and promote grants for management and creation activity not eligible under the countryside stewardship scheme;
- provide an income from the sale of local origin wildflower seed;
- develop new markets for local origin seed and plant plugs such as schools, highway verges, landfill sites, golf courses and retail developments;
- widen the commercial outlets for a range of meadow products such as herb-rich hay, plant oils and essences.

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<sup>1</sup>A plant of native origin in the progeny or direct descendant of wild individuals who have naturally regenerated at a site of collection, and which has been unaffected by recent introductions or plantings of the same related species.

## **Promote the use of local native origin seed to ensure the maintenance of local genetic stock and development of plant communities appropriate to the Weald**

- co-ordinate the collection of wildflower seed from species rich meadows for use in creating new meadows and enhancing existing species poor grassland;
- encourage Countryside Stewardship and other agri-environment and grant schemes to promote and support the use of local origin wildflowers and grasses for creation and enhancement.

## **Provide practical advice and support to assist with the management of existing and new wildflower grasslands**

- provide a comprehensive site specific advisory service for wildflower meadow management, creation and enhancement, including site preparation, establishment and aftercare techniques;
- set up training courses for landowners and advisors;
- trial and monitor management and creation techniques;
- provide and promote technical advice based on the latest local and national research to ensure best practice.

## **Support the rural economy through assisting farmers and agricultural contractors adapt to changing roles and priorities**

- enable existing local suppliers of conventional grass seed to expand their product range to include local origin wildflower seed;
- enable existing suppliers of plant plugs to expand their product range;
- enable landowners and managers to maximise the opportunities to support a viable farm enterprise through management for conservation and landscape benefit.

### *1.3 Targets*

- to identify all unimproved and semi-improved wildflower meadows in the High and Low Weald areas;
- to identify and contact all meadows owners with preliminary information on the wildflower grasslands of the High Weald;
- to advise all meadow owners on appropriate management/enhancement and creation techniques and to secure grant aid where necessary to assist with appropriate management/enhancement and creation;
- to ensure all landowners are aware of the benefits and availability of local origin seed;
- to develop the seed harvesting operation to a financially self sustaining position by the year 2003.

## **2. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION**

### *2.1 Location*

The Weald Meadows Initiative operates within the High and Low Weald Natural areas which cover parts of the counties of Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey

### *2.2 Goalposts*

#### **Goalpost 1 - The Weald Meadows Report 1995**

As the first stage in the development of the Initiative the High Weald Unit commissioned a report to examine the current state of the wildflower grassland resource and the effectiveness of existing mechanisms in ensuring its appropriate management and protection. Detailed inventories of meadow sites were compiled together with sample case studies to illustrate the

problems faced by meadow owners.

The report suggested a number of activities which could be pursued, highlighting the need to appoint a co-ordinator, to make better use of existing resources and examine options to generate income for meadow owners, as a high priority.

### **Goalpost 2 - Weald Meadows Group**

In 1993, in recognition of the threats to the wildflower grassland resource in the Weald, the Weald meadows group was formed to address the issue of conserving wildflower grasslands in the Weald. The group has effectively steered the work of the Initiative.

### **Goalpost 3 - Targeted and proactive advice**

In 1993 the High Weald FWAG Officer was appointed with a remit to spend 30% of the time undertaking research and providing advice to landowners on meadow management.

### **Goalpost 4 - Pilot seed harvesting programme 1996**

In the absence of funding for a dedicated meadows officer, the High Weald Farming and Wildlife Advisor initiated a pilot seed harvesting programme to identify the scope for harvesting viable wildflower seed from existing meadows.

With support from East Sussex County Council a brush seed harvester was purchased and seed harvested from wildflower grasslands. Germination trials indicated a high success rate with all target species identified as ripe when harvested appearing in the germinating sward.

### **Goalpost 5 - Appointment of the Weald Meadows Officer 1997**

The Meadows Officer post with support from FWAG has been instrumental in the success of the Initiative. Although part time (2-3 days June to November and 1-2 days November to May) the officer has undertaken the considerable amount of liaison work associated with the seed harvesting operation and meadow creation. This liaison work includes;

- identifying and surveying suitable harvesting sites;
- engaging landowner interest;
- directing agricultural operations to ensure the harvesting of ripe seed from appropriate locations during suitable weather conditions;
- advising customers on the suitability of their land for enhancement or creation;
- advising on the management and enhancement of meadows in conjunction with the FWAG officer (primarily smaller, non agricultural sites which do not fall within the remit of FWAG).

### **Goalpost 6 - The Business Plan 1997**

In 1997 a business plan for the Initiative was developed in recognition of the need to work long term towards the establishment of a self sustaining venture for the harvesting operations. The plan identified a self sustaining position after a three year period of investment.

## **2.3 Project Set up**

### **2.3.1 Steering Partners**

The Weald Meadows Initiative has been developed by a sub group of High Weald Forum partners known as the Weald Meadows Group. The group is a partnership between FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group); High Weald AONB Unit (HWU), ADAS (Agricultural Development Advisory Service); English Nature, Mike Mullis wildflower plants, Agrifactors, the County Wildlife Trusts and East Sussex, West Sussex and Kent County Councils. The group has primarily been responsible for discussing issues surrounding the conservation of meadows, identifying solutions and lobbying internally and externally for financial support for the Weald

Meadows Initiative.

Implementation of the Initiative has primarily been by a sub section of the Weald Meadows Group. The key partner involved with implementation and their roles are as follows:-

#### Agrifactors

Agrifactors is a local seed merchants and agricultural contractor. The company plays a key role in the Initiative and is responsible for:-

- seed harvesting;
- seed drying and packaging;
- quality control;
- managing the accounts relating to the purchase and sale of seed.

#### Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

The Farming and Wildlife Group was responsible for setting up and managing the seed harvesting operation during the pilot year and undertakes key activities as follows:

- providing advice to landowners on meadow management, creation and enhancement;
- promoting the Initiative to farmers and landowners;
- monitoring the effects of management practices on existing and new meadows;
- lobbying for appropriate financial support from the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

#### High Weald AONB Unit

The High Weald AONB Unit plays a co-ordinating role with key activities as follows:-

- organising and chairing meadow group meetings;
- managing the meadows officer post;
- bidding for and managing Weald Meadows Initiative funds;
- promoting the Initiative to local authorities and other conservation organisations and landscape professionals;
- ensuring development of the Initiative to a self sustaining venture.

#### Other partners

In addition to the above the High and Low Weald countryside management services and ADAS have been involved with offering advice to local landowners. The County Wildlife Trusts have been involved with undertaking wildflower grassland surveys and managing grassland sites within their ownership. Mike Mullis wildflower plants has also been working with the Initiative to supply local origin plant plugs.

### **2.3.2 Funding partners**

The following organisations have provided valuable financial support: English Nature, Countryside Commission, Rural Development Commission, WWF, Denis Curry Charitable Trust, East Sussex County Council, Kent County Council and West Sussex County Council.

## *2.4 Advice*

### **2.4.1 Meadow Management**

During the period of the report over 82 landowners have been given advice by the Weald Meadows Officer with 21 of those receiving a site visit and detailed report<sup>2</sup>. The assistance, in order of priority, required by landowners includes:-

- details on appropriate management;
- sources of grants to assist with appropriate management and assistance with developing applications;

<sup>2</sup> These figures have to be considered in the light of the Meadows Officer post starting May 1998 (mid way through the report period) and the post being part time, 2 days May-November and 1 day November to May.

- information on the species within and the value of their grassland;
- lists of local contractors and graziers.

As result of assistance with countryside stewardship applications from the FWAG and Weald Meadows Officer during the three year period 96-99 over 37 landowners were offered financial assistance with meadow management. A total of 70 sites including 5 SNCIs and 1 SSSI are now receiving assistance through countryside stewardship grants.

#### **2.4.2 Meadow Creation/Enhancement**

During the period of the report 82 landowners have sought advice on meadow creation/enhancement from the Weald Meadows Officer with 9 receiving site visits and follow up reports. Of the 82 landowners seeking advice approximately 50% have actively purchased seed and plant plugs and undertaken the necessary sowing work on a total of 67 sites. The assistance required in order of priority is as follows:

- site survey to determine whether their land is suitable for wildflower creation;
- details of wildflower seed suppliers;
- details of sources of grants to assist with meadow creation/enhancement;
- advice on meadow creation techniques;
- lists of local contractors and graziers.

The success of the schemes has been variable. The work involved in enhancing and creating wildflower grassland is substantial (see [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org) for technical information sheets) and in many instances failure is due to landowners inability (lack of time, resources, understanding, commitment) to follow the creation/enhancement guidelines. Other failures have resulted from spoiled seed (overheated Yellow Rattle which was subsequently replaced) or grazing by rabbits.

As result of assistance with countryside stewardship applications from the FWAG and Weald Meadows Officer over 27 landowners are now receiving financial assistance with meadow enhancement/creation. In addition a growing number of farmers are or will be creating grass margins around arable fields as part of the countryside stewardship scheme and will be using Weald seed to supplement natural regeneration.

### *2.5 Seed Harvesting Operation*

#### **2.5.1 Machinery and other equipment**

The brush harvester used by the initiative has proved to be effective in harvesting seed without damage to insects or reducing the value of the remaining hay crop. Its inefficiency (as compared to other models) is considered to be beneficial in that it permits a proportion of the seed to remain and disperse to become part of the seed bank.

A small, second hand combine harvester (1.2m header) was purchased by Agrifactors in 1998 to complement the brush harvester. The harvester is used on sites with low growing flower species (that would be missed by the brush harvester). The combine was used selectively on an experimental basis at 2 sites resulting in 5 natural seed mixes. These experiments indicated that the sites needed to be even to prevent the guidelines from digging into the soil.

#### **2.5.2 Seed harvesting**

Prior to harvesting the site is monitored in order to ensure that harvesting occurs when the seed required is ripe. Only a proportion of a site is harvested in any one year and the harvesting area is rotated to ensure that there is no risk of over harvesting with consequent changes to the meadows ecology. Weeds such as thistles and bracken are pulled prior to harvesting and/or are

avoided during the harvesting process. Selected sites are harvested twice in order to collect seed ripening at different times.

### **2.5.3 Seed drying and cleaning**

The harvested seed is spread on drying racks or tarpaulins and rotated regularly to ensure that overheating does not occur. When completely dry the seed is cleaned (the seed separated out from the chaff) and transferred to plastic sacks for storage. Separation of the seed by weight and size, either by hand or using a basic seed cleaner, has in the first three years of the Initiative, limited the scope to offer a pure (wildflower only), rather than a mixed (wildflower and grass seed) product.

### **2.5.4 Seed storage**

The wildflower seed is stored in cool, dry conditions and checked regularly for pests, in particular vine weevils.

### **2.5.5 Seed packaging**

The seed is packaged by Agrifactors into standard 10kg plastic seed bags. Smaller quantities (1kg) are packaged into heavy-duty brown envelopes. Seed labels have been developed for all packaging.

### **2.5.6 Seed distribution**

The harvested seed is distributed by Agrifactors. However all potential customers are advised to seek advice from the Meadows Officer before purchasing the seed to ensure the receptor site is supplied with appropriate seed. If necessary a soil test is undertaken to ensure seed is only spread on sites where the soil conditions are suitable.

### **2.5.7 Site numbers**

At the end of the 1998 harvesting season 24 sites had been harvested over the three-year harvesting period. In 1997 harvesting took place on 14 sites. In 1998 harvesting from 19 sites resulted in 14 species rich, grass and wildflowers mixtures and 13 single species samples (including hand harvested seed).

### **2.5.8 Seed mix**

A range of local origin wildflower species or mixes are available; Weald Native Origin Wildflower Mix, Weald Native Origin Grass Mix, Yellow Rattle, Ox-eye Daisy and Devils Bit Scabious.

### **2.5.9 Site access**

Many of the meadows sites within the Weald are small and isolated, factors which have largely been accountable for their continued existence. Although access with machinery is achievable in most situations there are some sites, such as those located on steep slopes, where access is not practical.

### **2.5.10 Site distribution**

Meadow sites are scattered across the Weald area (1200 square kilometres) and therefore to be cost effective the seed harvesting process must concentrate on sites close to the contractual base at Heathfield. Seed harvesting can take place in other parts of the Weald but is only cost effective if there is a cluster of sites to be harvested, the seed is of a high value or if there is a customer prepared to support the additional costs. Leaving the harvester on site or in nearby buildings over night to reduce the need for transporting the machine is not an option because of insurance options and the possibility that poor weather would prevent use with consequent logistical problems.

### **2.5.11 Weather**

Seed must be harvested dry to avoid problems of mildew and overheating. The success of the harvesting process has been proven to be weather dependent. The majority of the seed is ripe for harvesting during a small window, July to August, and wet or dewy weather conditions severely reduce the number of days suitable for harvesting in this period.

Wet weather also leads to the proliferation of grass growth, in particular Yorkshire Fog, with the consequent reduction in the quality of the harvested seed.

## *2.6 Dissemination of Information*

### **2.6.1 Literature**

#### Wildflower grasslands in the Weald leaflet

In 1996 a leaflet entitled 'Wildflower grasslands in the Weald' was published to raise awareness of the plight of meadows in the area, to assist landowners and members of the public to recognise a meadow and to highlight appropriate management practices to conserve the resource. Over a two-year period 3000 copies of the leaflet were distributed direct to landowners and via other organisations. Following the success of the first leaflet another 10,000 copies of the leaflet were reprinted in 1998 for wider distribution to members of the public.

#### Technical Information Sheets

The FWAG have produced a series of technical information sheets for distribution to both FWAG and non-FWAG members. The WMI has updated these sheets and they are available on the web site [www.highweald.org](http://www.highweald.org) and include: Wildflower Grassland Creation in the Weald, Creating your own Small Wildflower Meadows, Enhancing Existing Grassland with Local Origin Wildflower Seed & Yellow Rattle Seed.

#### Annual reports

Annual reports on the progress of the Initiative have been produced for funding partners of FWAG, the HWU and the Weald Meadows Initiative.

#### Newsletters

The initiative has been promoted on a regular basis through the newsletters of the High Weald Unit and FWAG.

### **2.6.2 Media Coverage**

#### Press releases

In the period of the report FWAG and HWU have released 6 press releases. In addition to articles in local papers items have also appeared in the Independent Fox, Independent and Country Life.

### **2.6.3 Events**

#### Agricultural shows

The Weald Meadows Initiative has been represented on both the FWAG and Agrifactors' stands at both the Heathfield and South of England show.

#### Training and Open Days

The management and creation of wildflower meadows is a complex and intensive process with management and creation recommendations depending on the sites soil conditions, aspect, permeability and most importantly previous management. Such recommendations need to be based on a thorough understanding of the complexities of management and creation and normally must be based on the results of a site survey. The need to train advisors, contractors and landowners in the complexities of management was identified as important part of the

Initiative with the following events having been held:-

- **Landowners**

Open days to raise awareness of wildflower grasslands and their management have been held on an annual basis with target audiences primarily being landowners. These have normally been half day or evening events and aim to cover the questions normally asked by landowners. From 1999 onwards-open days will be rotated around the High Weald area with all relevant landowners in selected parishes being invited through the mailing service offered by MAFF to ADAS.

- **Advisors**

In 1998, building on the wildflower grassland open days, a two day training event was held for individuals with a remit to advise on the management and creation of wildflower grasslands. Over 15 advisors operating within the Weald area attended this and feedback from the course indicated that it was considered effective in equipping advisors with the confidence to make recommendations on wildflower grassland management.

- **Contractors**

Through their involvement in the seed harvesting operation Agrifactors staff have been trained in the practicalities of seed harvesting and sowing. Training for other contractors has not yet been offered by the Initiative but with an increasing number being involved with wildflower grassland establishment there is considerable potential to offer training courses tailored to their needs.

- **Policy makers**

Councillors, officers and other policy makers were invited to landowner events in 1996. However in 1997 a half-day event was held at Wakehurst Place specifically for local councillors and other policy makers to raise awareness of the activities, which were needed to conserve the resource and the role of the Initiative in promoting these activities.

#### **2.6.4 Marketing**

Marketing of the Weald native origin seed has primarily been through word of mouth with the majority of customers having heard about the seed through their involvement with officers advising on or administering the countryside stewardship scheme.

A limited number of enquiries have been received from developers, normally prompted by recommendations from planning officers. Interest from highways authorities has been limited due to the cost of the seed relative to normal supplies.

Low costs seed labels were developed in 1998 to help distinguish the seed from other wildflower mixes and market its environmental credentials. The labels aim to highlight the work which needs to be undertaken to successfully create or/and enhance a meadow and signpost customers to sources of advice.

#### **2.7 Project Monitoring**

Monitoring of the effects of seed harvesting, management and enhancement are carried out informally during site visits by the FWAG advisor and meadows officer. In addition to extensive informal monitoring the following monitoring is undertaken:

##### **2.7.1 Annual questionnaire to all seed customers**

A questionnaire has been devised as a means of assessing the success or otherwise of wildflower grassland creation with Weald native origin wildflower seed. The questionnaire primarily aims to extract information on the management techniques employed by the

customer in creating or enhancing the grassland. The techniques employed are crucial to successful establishment and the success of the Initiative is therefore largely dependent on whether customers are heeding the written and verbal advice provided by the Weald Meadows Officer and other advisors working in the area. In March 1999 the questionnaire was sent to all Agrifactors customers who have purchased wildflower seed with a 33% response rate (13 out of the 36 sent were returned).

### **2.7.2 Annual seed germination trials**

Since the beginning of the Initiative annual seed germination trails have been carried out by the FWAG advisor and meadows officer. In July 1998 germination trials were carried out on the remaining stocks of 96 and 97 seed to determine the viability of the seed. All samples tested germinated with the exception of the Devil's Bit Scabious, which requires a cold winter for vernalisation. A similar experiment was carried out on all 1998 stock during the autumn of 1998.

### **2.7.3 Experimental field trials**

In 1996 trial plots were set up at St Dunstons Farm. These aim to compare wildflower grassland development on plots seeded with using hay bales, seed harvested with the brush harvester. Existing species rich grassland has been used as a control for the experiments and the plots have been subdivided with half of each plot treated with P & K fertiliser. All plots have been managed in the same way as a hay meadow.

The plots have provided information on the success or otherwise of different establishment techniques over a three year period. The plots seeded with hay bales and harvested seed have both developed a meadow with an average of 25 wildflower and grassland species. In year 3 (1999) slower germinating species have just begun to appear.

The plots are an ongoing experiment and should also provide valuable information on the success or otherwise of subsequent management techniques although it is likely that the landowner will require the land for other purposes in the new future. In Autumn 1998 a new trial area was added to compare the germination of Yellow Rattle seed collected from:-

- A) a chalk downland SSSI site in Berkshire;
- B) a chalk grassland creation site supplied by Flower Farms in Hungerford;
- C) neutral grassland at Three Oaks in the High Weald;
- D) acidic grassland at St Dunstan's Farm.

Enhancement trials in conjunction with the Countryside Stewardship Scheme were laid down in autumn 1998 in the High Weald Natural area at Pickham Farm, Pett, East Sussex. The experiment has been designed to compare methods of establishing local origin wildflower seed by broadcasting onto three plots (replicated 12 times) treated as follows: -

- 1/ Spraying out 1m square patches using Glyphosate;
- 2/ Removal of turf on 1m square patch;
- 3/ Tightly grazed and raked 1m square patch.

Detailed records of all operations carried out are being recorded and assessments will be carried out from 1999 onwards.

### **2.7.4 Database**

A grassland database has been created as a working tool, which identifies unimproved and semi-improved meadow and pasture, ownership, size, species composition and management and also includes creation and enhancement sites. Recording of this information in a standard,

but flexible format will allow the Unit, FWAG and other select organisations to monitor the management and resulting quality of existing and new wildflower grasslands.

There has been some discussion over the definition of a species rich grassland. It has been agreed that in order to qualify for entry to the database at least 20 grassland species must be present. However overall wildlife value based on first hand experience of the site is used as a final decision. For example the presence of native grass species with strong populations of one or two valuable species like Dyers Greenweed, Ox-eye Daisy or Bird's-foot Trefoil are included.

Given the limited time available to the Meadows Officer to work on the database it is not entirely complete but will be finalised in November 1999.

### **3. FUNDING**

During 1996 - 1998 the total cost of operating the Initiative has been £30942 with the majority of expenditure (£10359) covering the salary and on costs of the meadows officer post, the purchase of essential equipment (£7287) and contractor costs (£4795). These costs relate only to the seed harvesting operation and do not include the funds provided for the High Weald FWAG Officer whose activity is an essential part of the Initiative.

### **4. PROJECT OUTPUTS**

#### *4.1 Environmental*

- over 200 unimproved and semi-improved wildflower grasslands within the Weald are now detailed in the database with approximately 70 having been identified through the work of the Initiative;
- over 82 landowners have received preliminary advice (written literature) on meadow management and creation from the Weald Meadows Officer (excluding advice provided by FWAG and in addition to the 5000 leaflets distributed to landowners);
- 21 landowners have received more detailed advice (preliminary visit and follow up visits) on meadow management from the Weald Meadows Officer;
- 9 landowners have received detailed advice (preliminary visit and follow up visit) on meadow creation from the Weald Meadows Officer;
- approximately 28 sites pa have been visited to assess their potential for supplying local origin seed;
- over 70 wildflower grassland sites have been entered into the stewardship scheme;
- over 67 grassland sites have been sown with Weald native origin seed.

#### *4.2 Economic*

- 22 landowners have been engaged in the seed harvesting operation;
- over £2980 has been paid direct to landowners for the supply of local origin seed;
- Two agricultural contracting firms have diversified.

#### *4.3 Training*

- 67 landowners have received training (30 1996, 15 1997, 22 1998);
- 20 advisors operating within the Weald of the South East have received training.

### **5. FUTURE DEVELOPMENT**

## 5.1 *Current position*

The Weald Meadows Initiative has demonstrated the scope to address rural environmental and economic issues through demonstrating a mechanism of developing a new countryside product from conception to commercial viability. It shows a potential way forward for adding value to the products of wildflower meadows, boosting farm incomes and maintaining wildflower grasslands as part of a viable pastoral farming system.

## 5.2 *Opportunities*

Given the success of the seed harvesting operation and ongoing support for other activity undertaken by the Initiative it is expected that there will be scope to develop additional activity as follows:

- adding value to the wildflower grasslands products through the further development and marketing of the products;
- seeking an increase in the level of return to landowners supplying wildflower seed;
- promoting the use of local origin seed to other seed users within the area including gardeners through selected outlets;
- examining mechanisms by which the seed harvesting operation can be effectively and economically carried out across the whole of the Low Weald and other natural areas;
- examining sources of grant aid for meadows owners currently not eligible for support under the countryside stewardship scheme;
- setting up and managing a grazing flock to assist with the practicalities of small site management;
- setting up a pilot training course for agricultural contractors involved with wildflower creation;
- developing more cost effective advice through the production of an advisory video;
- promoting links between meadow owners through the production and circulation of a newsletter.

## 5.3 *Constraints*

Despite the ongoing development of the Initiative over the last three years the following are expected to remain as limiting factors;

- the limited number of sites suitable for harvesting (long term);
- unpredictable weather conditions (long term);
- large area (with consequent increase in costs) which the Initiative must cover to expand to a self sustaining venture (mid term);
- time involved in maintaining an effective database (short term);
- difficulties landowners are experiencing in grazing meadows sites (mid term);
- the capital costs of setting up management infrastructure on small sites (mid term).

## **6. THE WAY FORWARD**

The Initiative will continue to work towards the targets set out in the business plan for the seed harvesting operation and for the Initiative as a whole.

Financial support for the Initiative has been offered by English Nature and the Countryside Agency for a period of three years and it is expected that this will provide the necessary additional support required while moving the seed harvesting operation to a self sustaining venture in 2003.