



A clear solution for farmers

CATCHMENT SENSITIVE FARMING

Tenant farmer slashes costs and risk with low-input cropping plan

Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) has been working together with farmers since 2006. John Hawkins' local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer (CSFO), Charlotte Woodford, has been supporting his farm's move to regenerative agriculture, benefitting both the farm and the environment.

John Hawkins is a third generation tenant farmer whose family have been at the 239ha Bagber Farm in Milborne St Andrew, Dorset since 1947. John has been engaged with CSF on and off since its inception back in 2006.



Local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer Charlotte has been working with farmer John to reduce nitrates and improve the farm business at Bagber Farm

The farm is in the Dorset Frome and Piddle catchment. Both these rivers drain into Poole Harbour, designated as a Special Protected Area (SPA) under the EU Habitat Regulations. It supports large numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders which are nationally and internationally important.

John and his parents farm in partnership on what is considered a **typical medium sized,**

average to low yielding arable farm in the locality. They gave up dairy and then beef around 20 years ago to become a stockless enterprise like many of their neighbours.

The overall trend in the last 12 years has seen smaller profits from the arable business. The Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) cheque each year was the only guaranteed income.

The traditional way of doing things

From 2000 to 2018 the farm operated a min-till, medium input arable rotation of oilseed rape, feed wheat and two spring barleys with a small area of beans to meet [Ecological Focus Area](#) requirements.

Buying in bagged nitrogen, poultry manure, along with pest & disease control, **they achieved average wheat yields of 9t/ha.** Increasing costs of production, ageing machinery and poor grain storage facilities were ever more challenging to turn a profit.

Journey to Regenerative Agriculture

In recent years, John has begun to take part in on farm trials to improve his efficiencies.

Early on, the farm participated in an ADAS and Water Company-led scheme, [WAgriCO](#). These practices however **only delivered marginal benefits for wildlife and biodiversity** on approximately 5% of the farmed area.

More recently, John has continued to work very closely with Wessex Water's Catchment Management Team. Through this partnership, they have been able to undertake trials with cover crops and some arable reversion.

Another driver for change has been the issue with Poole Harbour. This is failing its conservation objectives due to elevated levels of nitrates and phosphates entering the harbour. As a consequence the Harbour is now considered to be [eutrophic](#).

The results from the trials soon revealed that **they actually saved money** and were far less expensive to implement than medium intensity arable production on a per hectare basis.

The road to recovery

Although the input costs were lower, John soon realised that they would still need other income to support the newly adopted environmental / natural capital approach. They therefore developed and signed up to a whole-farm Mid-Tier Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

John's local Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer (CSFO), Charlotte, got involved with this back in 2016, supporting John to work up his application.

Charlotte said:

"What I admire about John is that he is not afraid to try something new. A few years on neighbouring farmers are approaching him for support and guidance.

"Bagber Farm is a great example of what can be achieved across a whole holding for multiple environmental objectives. They've **improved biodiversity, enhanced wildlife & pollinators as well as tackled issues relating to water quality** across the farm. **All whilst**

remaining productive and ensuring it's sustainable during these challenging times."

John said:

"My local CSFO, has been invaluable. She helped me throughout the process and helping to put the scheme together was never too much trouble. We got there in the end. **If it had not been for her, it's likely the scheme would have failed."**



Cherry trees at Bagber Farm incorporating agroforestry and Countryside Stewardship scheme

Looking to the future

By combining income streams from crop sales, Mid-Tier, BPS, and other sources, John has managed to reduce the financial volatility of his business. He is now able to make 5 year business plans for the farm without the high cash flow risk of intensive production for yield. The ability to forecast income streams and costs allows more flexibility to try out new growing concepts which would have been too risky before changing his farming system.

Bagber Farm is now a 'whole farm' Mid-Tier Countryside Stewardship and Wessex Water supported farm and has also been featured in [Farmer's Weekly](#).

Get in touch with your local CSFO for advice, support or access to funding. Search GOV.UK for Catchment Sensitive Farming.