

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Supplementary guidance for the 3rd edition ELS and OELS handbooks



We have produced this guidance for farmers and advisers in response to requests for clarification of a number of points in the 3rd edition ELS and OELS Handbooks. It applies to agreements made under the terms of the 3rd edition ELS and OELS Handbooks. It does not apply to existing agreements set up under the 1st and 2nd edition Handbooks.

The guidance covers the following options and issues:

- 1. Management control of boundaries**
- 2. Buffer strips next to watercourses and water bodies.**
- 3. In-field arable options in areas of wind erosion risk.**
- 4. In-field trees.**
- 5. Grass sward height requirements**
- 6. Eligibility of ditches for O/ELS.**

1. MANAGEMENT CONTROL OF BOUNDARIES

The general principle is that you must have management control over the side or sides of the boundary which you are entering into the management option – and be able to follow the management requirements of the option.

You can use double-sided options when you have control of both sides; if you do not have control over both sides you can apply for single-sided options.

Roadside hedges and hedges on the holding boundary may be eligible for either single or double-sided options depending on your level of management control.

You must be able to follow the management prescriptions in full. Where a roadside or trackside hedge has to be trimmed annually or more frequently for public safety, it is not eligible for options O/EB1 (two-sided hedge management) or O/EB3 (enhanced hedgerow management). However you may enter the non-road side of the hedge into option O/EB2 (one-sided management).

O/EB2 – Hedgerow management on one side of a hedge

O/EB9 – Combined hedge and ditch management

You can use these options where you have management control of only one side of the hedgerow, or hedgerow and ditch.

O/EB13 – Earth bank management on one side

In the 3rd edition handbooks, the section for options O/EB12 and O/EB13 states that “you must have management control over the management of both sides of the bank”. This statement applies only to O/EB12 (Earth bank management on both sides). For O/EB13, you need only have management control of the one side of the earth bank for which you are claiming.

2. BUFFER STRIPS NEXT TO WATERCOURSES AND WATER BODIES

2 m and 4 m buffer strips **can** be located next to watercourses (O/EE1, O/EE2, O/EE4 and O/EE5).

Where you decide to use a 6 m buffer strip next to a watercourse, you should use the specific options O/EE9 and O/EE10, **not** O/EE6, which is for a 6 m buffer strip in any other location.

The term “watercourse” includes a wide range of waterbodies. The Glossary in the ELS and OELS Handbooks defines a watercourse as a surface water body, whether a lake, pond, river, stream, canal, leat or ditch, which regularly contains standing or running water. These features should be marked on the Farm Environment Record (FER), according to the map key.

3. IN-FIELD ARABLE OPTIONS IN AREAS OF WIND EROSION RISK

This applies to options **O/EF6** and **EF22**. Concerns have been raised about the use of some in-field options where there is a risk of soil erosion by wind. There is a balance between taking opportunities to promote suitable conditions for ground nesting birds such as stone curlew, and preventing wind erosion of soils. ELS and OELS management options must not increase erosion risk in susceptible locations.

In HLS agreements, Natural England advisers will weigh up the interests of Farmland Birds and Resource Protection (along with all other scheme objectives) for each individual agreement. This should determine whether or not an option is appropriate at any specific location and include, where necessary, measures to remove erosion risks.

For **O/EF6** (Overwintered stubble) and **EF22**(Extended overwintered stubble) the 3rd edition Handbooks state “It should not be located where there is a high risk of soil erosion or run-off (that is, land identified in your FER as at risk of soil erosion and where rills are regularly seen in wet weather)”. The emphasis on the development of rills in wet weather indicates that the main concern with these options is risk of erosion by water, not wind.

Therefore you can use these options where the soil erosion risk (as identified on the FER) relates solely to wind erosion.

In these situations, write “wind erosion” across any fields identified as being at risk of soil erosion on the FER (dark brown hatching) where the risk relates to wind erosion only.

4. IN-FIELD TREES

This relates to option **O/EC2**. The 3rd edition handbooks state that EC2 (protection of in-field trees on grassland) can be co-located **only** with EK5 and UL18. Where you wish to have EC2 and any other option in the same field, you will need to reduce the area of the other option to allow for the EC2. The same applies to EC1 (protection of in-field trees on arable) which is not co-locatable with any other options.

Make the calculation based on the area of the canopy, plus an additional 2 m, for the tree or trees. If this comes to less than 0.01 ha, then no deduction is necessary, but if it is equal to or more than 0.01 ha, deduct this area from the area of the other, incompatible, option.

Examples:

EK3 to be applied across a 1.00 ha field containing one mid-field tree.

Tree canopy area = 80 m² = 0.008 ha.

0.008 ha < 0.01 ha, so no deduction is necessary.

Area entered into EK3 = 1.00 ha.

If there are two trees, each with a canopy of 80 m², the total area is

160 m² = 0.016 ha.

0.016 ha > 0.01 ha so a deduction must be applied.

Area entered into EK3 = 1.00 ha – 0.016 ha = 0.984 ha,

rounded to nearest 0.01 ha = 0.98 ha

5. GRASS SWARD HEIGHT REQUIRMENTS

This relates to options **O/EK2 and 3**. We have been asked how the sward height requirement in O/EK2 and 3 is assessed. Inspectors carry out a visual assessment of each field. They will carry out more detailed checks if the majority of the sward is less than 7 cm.

6. ELIGIBILITY OF DITCHES FOR O/ELS

This relates to options **O/EB6–10**. The eligibility requirements set out in the 3rd edition ELS and OELS Handbooks are that:

- The options are intended for ditches forming field boundaries in their own right.
- Eligible ditches must regularly contain standing or flowing water.
- Eligible ditches must contain vegetation typical of wet ditches.

So, to clarify:

- There is **no minimum level** of typical vegetation cover that must be present.
- The list of typical species provided in the Handbooks is illustrative only and is not a definitive list. Typical vegetation excludes non-native species such as Himalayan balsam.

Typical vegetation that we would expect to see in eligible ditches or on ditch banks includes (but is not restricted to):

Common reed
 Water mint
 Yellow flag
 Marsh marigold
 Reed canary grass
 Fool's water cress
 Reed canary-grass
 Branched bur-reed
 Floating sweet-grass
 Reed sweet-grass
 Meadow sweet

Some useful references for identifying plants include:

- Botanical Society for the British Isles <http://www.botanicalkeys.co.uk/flora/>
- "The Wildflower Key" by Francis Rose, revised & updated by Clare O'Reilly
- "Grasses, Ferns, Mosses & Lichens of Great Britain and Ireland" by Roger Phillips & Sheila Grant