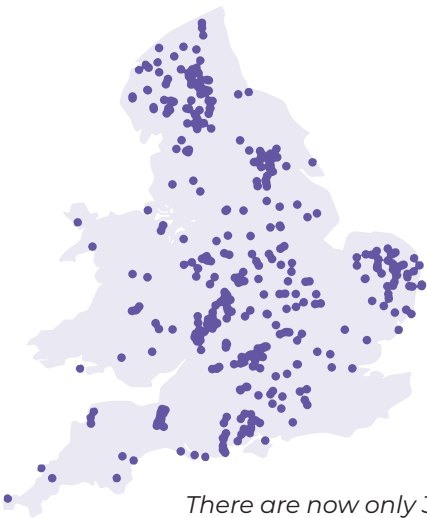


## FLOODPLAIN MEADOWS IN ENGLAND AND WALES BEST PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Once widespread in river valleys, flower-rich floodplain meadows are perfectly adapted to flooding, grazing and cutting. They were highly prized as their nutritious hay kept farm animals alive and healthy through the winter. They recover well after flooding, when nutrient-rich river sediments are deposited as a natural fertiliser, and they are productive during drought because of their fertile soil and deep rooted plants.



*There are now only 3000 ha,  
1% of their former extent, remaining.*



Photo credit: Mike Dodd

Most traditional flower-rich floodplain meadows have been built on, excavated for minerals, drained, sprayed, ploughed or re-seeded.

We are increasingly aware of how useful these habitats are because of the many benefits they provide:

- Self-sustaining systems producing healthy meat and hay without the need for chemicals
- Supporting pollinating insects such as bees and hoverflies
- Storing carbon and floodwaters
- Rebuilding soils
- Reducing siltation and pollution in rivers.



Photo credit: Mike Dodd



## Management requirements

### 1. An annual hay cut

Most meadows are “shut up” in spring, then cut for hay when the grasses flower in June or July, depending on the weather. Cutting every year is vital to stop the vegetation from becoming coarse and prevent nutrient accumulation. Unmanaged meadows rapidly lose diversity and become dominated by tussocky grasses and tall herbs such as thistles and hogweed.

Hay yields are lower than from intensively managed grasslands, but meadow hay is highly nutritious, containing micro-nutrients and medicinal compounds essential for livestock health. The best quality hay is produced from the richest plant communities.

The exact timing of cutting depends on prevailing weather conditions - meadow hay needs to be cut when it is ready, usually between mid-June and mid-July.

### 2. A second cut or aftermath grazing

If there is sufficient grass growth by September, floodplain meadows are cut again or grazed, usually by cattle. Grazing animals are best removed once the soil is saturated to prevent soil compaction. On drier sites, livestock graze in early spring before the meadow is shut up again for hay from mid - end April.

### 3. Ditch and drainage infrastructure

Regular maintenance of ditches, gutters and surface drains helps remove floodwater efficiently and keeps the soil aerated, vital for sustaining a diverse and productive meadow.

### 4. Control of invasive or undesirable plants

Sometimes it may be necessary to control plants such as marsh ragwort, bulky sedges or creeping thistle. If possible, this is done using cultural means such as cutting, rather than using herbicides which can be very damaging.



*The annual hay cut is critical to maintain the quality of the hay and diversity of wildflowers*

## Key Points

**Regular hay cutting is essential to maintain diversity. The timing of cutting and grazing needs to respond to conditions in each year rather than being determined by specific calendar dates**

**Artificial fertilisers and herbicides are not needed and will be damaging. Weeds can be controlled by cutting rather than spraying.**

## Where to get advice

**Much more detailed advice can be found on our web site: [www.floodplainmeadows.org.uk](http://www.floodplainmeadows.org.uk)**

FMP Ambassadors are trained and available in many counties to provide local advice.

See 'Restoring floodplain meadows in England and Wales' advice note.

Natural England and Natural Resources Wales may offer advice on managing floodplain meadows, especially if providing support through agri-environment schemes

Your local Wildlife Trust may be able to offer guidance and advice  
<http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/>

The Environment Agency (England) and Natural Resources Wales can provide information on flooding and water quality, the need for flood-risk assessments and other permits if planning any work.