

Video Transcript: Farmer Debbie Wilkins describes her flourishing floodplains and how she manages them.

So our farm is in Gloucestershire, in the Severn Vale. We've got about 950 acres here, a mixture of arable and permanent pasture with some of them floodplain meadows. So when the floods were peak about two weeks ago, we probably have 350 acres underwater. Some of the meadows are in higher level scheme for species rich or overwintering waders and then other meadows are just permanent pasture, that we just farm low input, but aren't in any specific schemes. So, the meadows that we're at here, by Coombe Hill Nature reserve, about 120 acres here. The majority goes under water. We take a hay cuts from these, so they'll have nothing done to them. They have no fertiliser, no sprays, nothing, and they take a hay cut at the end of June, beginning of July. Then we will move cattle down here and aftermath graze the cattle on the fields until the autumn, and then they come off in the autumn. Some of the fields on the banks we will grazing the spring because they've got ridge and furrow and other things, so we can't take a hay cut. But it's quite important for the farm to have a balance between what we can do, hay cut and aftermath graze, but we also have to have land that we can graze earlier in the year and take silage cuts and the hay is very useful for the winter for our young stock, and our cows, they particularly like the hay from here. We've noticed that if we take from more kind of ryegrass, higher intensity fields compared to this hay and we put two bales out for the cows, they'll eat all the hay from here before they'll touch the other hay.

[Caption on screen: What do you do with your floodplain land?]

So on the floodplain land, I've tried different ways of grazing. One of the things I do when I make hay is I always leave a strip down the middle of every field, kind of a mower width. I kind of feel that if you're cutting a whole field of hay, you're just making a desert. So I leave the sanctuary. So when the cattle go in, they, they've got that bit to eat and anything that's around the edges and stuff, and then they'll stay probably from end of July until, I think we moved the last ones off in December this year. So other fields that are in the floodplain, I've got other regimes in, so I've got planted what I call a wetland herbal mix, which is grasses that cope with being flooded and also have some herbs and stuff in there. This year I did a trial mob grazing those. The cattle had basically an area for one day and each day they were moved on. And that was really interesting and I was really pleased, especially where the herbs were. They carried on growing even in that heat and they were the only group of cattle that I had that didn't need any supplementary feeding or anything. So I did also another trial on some other meadows. So meadow land, but not species rich. I did one lot where I did rotational grazing. They were going in with kind of normal covers, but every day they would move around, and then another lot I just gave them a whole field. They had similar growth rates between the two groups, but the ones on rotational grazing used half the acreage that I used for the set stocking. While that was happening, we did some dung beetles and faecal egg count, and actually because we did the long grass grazing, we never got to an amount of worms that we needed to worm the cattle. But we did notice when we had to fly treat them that that hit the dung beetles. Not as bad as we thought, but it knocked it by about 50%, and then they came back again.

[Caption on screen: Tell us about your stewardship schemes.]

I've just been offered an extension for a ten year HLS (Higher Level Stewardship), so I'm in year 11 now, and they've offered me five years, so it might be 16 years by the time I've finished it. But before that we were in countryside stewardship. We had two goes at countryside stewardship. So that was 20 years, and so that was before I was involved in the farm. I think it was FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) that probably were in contact with my father, and my father was always very keen on the environment. And wildlife I suppose more, yeah. He likes his hedges big, he likes to see wildlife, so that's why he, I assume he put it in. I mean, it pays, it means that we can farm quite extensively and yeah, they pay for themselves. I think if you didn't have the HLS, you would think maybe I need to get more out of these fields. We don't put anything into them. So we haven't got a cost of inputs. But you know, you've got your

capital cost that you've bought the land, and it needs to do something. If I only had these fields, then I think I'd find it hard. But because I've got the young stock from dairy that I prefer to grow extensively, so they're just grass fed, and I instead of and I don't have them in sheds until I'm finishing them, it works well for me of doing it that way. And the hay works well. I like the hay going back into the cows as well. So I think if I didn't have a place for the hay to go and I didn't have any cattle to graze, it would be hard, but it works in the context of whole farm.

[Caption on screen: What advice and support have you found useful?]

Yeah, advice from people like FWAG has been very important, but then also kind of finding your own way. So there's advice there, and you look at what other people do, then you work out what fits your context. I think context is so important because every farm is different and what works for me, having these meadows might not work for my neighbour who hasn't got the other land that's not flooded. And so they need to do it in a different way. I probably had advice from different directions from different people, but things like I think the first Countryside Stewardship, and I think this HLS, a FWAG adviser came and helped us set it up. I'm in Severn Vale Guardians, which we've been a part of a few years, and then I'm also part of a dairy discussion group, and then kind of wider things like the regenerative pilot group, things like that. So kind of take lots of different, different advice, different ways of looking at it from different people. Just having that support that you know, that you're doing the right thing... it wasn't until a couple of years ago that people suddenly started saying, "Ah, you've got really nice meadows there", and it's like, "ooh!", it's quite nice to have that positive feedback and to know that you're doing something, something good.

[Caption on screen: What are your soils like here?]

Most of the farm is quite heavy clay, high magnesium and high potassium. I've always done soil tests, but I've always done more than just your magnesium, potassium and phosphate. I will always do calcium because the calcium magnesium balance is quite important, I think, and I always do organic matter. Until a couple of years ago I hadn't tested any of these fields at all down here because I thought, we're not allowed to put anything on them. We're not going to do anything. But I was doing a suite of tests and I thought, I'll just test them. I was pleasantly surprised. Like, one field had 23% organic matter, and the others like 17, 18%. Low phosphate, which I was expecting because I don't put anything on, reasonably high magnesium, and most of the farm is like pH 7.5, 7.8. These were a bit more towards the neutral range.

[Caption on screen: Tell us about your wildlife.]

These fields need to be farmed for the wildlife value. If they were not, if we did not take hay cuts and graze them, they would very quickly revert to scrub and trees and that wouldn't be suitable habitat for the breeding waders and overwintering birds. And also you'd lose all those flowers and other botanical species, dragonflies, butterflies, everything else that's down here. So to keep them with their value that they have, they need to have hay cut. One field when they were doing a botanical survey, they heard lots of quail, more than one in that. So we didn't cut it until September to leave them in peace. When there's water filling the meadows, a lot of the birds that are in the nature reserve next door, when it's got too much water come over. So we get a lot of different wetland birds. When the cattle were grazing this autumn, there were clouds of yellow wagtails following them round, which was lovely.

[Caption on screen: What challenges do you face?]

Lungworm is a worry on these kind of pastures, but all of them are vaccinated with a vaccine called Huskvac before they come out. So I'm hoping that they don't need any worming. The timings... so, you know, you have beautiful weather ready to make hay in kind of middle of June, but you're not allowed to because of the requirements of the scheme. And then you're allowed to cut it and then you get really bad weather. So that's sometimes a bit tricky. The other thing that we've noticed is that if you cut too late, we get more weeds coming. So the reed canary grass kind of likes the later cut. There's quite a number of footpaths that come

across the fields which I'm... I love these fields, and I'm happy to share them with people, but it's just people's attitudes. They think that it's a place for their dogs to run free. And when you say, you know... "I'm trying to encourage breeding curlews here. Please don't let your dogs free", they give you abuse.

[Caption on screen: What are your plans for the future?]

We're doing things like we did some pond restoration this year, and some scrapes. So kind of improving those and things like going round, kind of regularly and pollard the willows. Some of the hedges are getting really big now. On the whole farm, I want to have a rotation of coppicing hedges, and I've been using the woodchip from when I've been doing the pollarding to add to the muck, and the idea is to make that into compost with the slurry from the dairy. I want to plant some arable land that floods with the herbal wetland mix that I put in on another bit of arable land, because that didn't require any fertiliser, it coped with being flooded, and I took, one field I took three cuts of silage off last year without doing anything to it. Whereas other things weren't growing, and it grew so. So I'd like to, yeah, different bits of the floodplain, manage in different ways, some more nature friendly and HLS, some more intensive but still on the regenerative side. So I've got lots of ideas for the whole farm, but the meadows, I think they're good how they are. And, you know, I have been asked whether I want to kind of restore some of the more intensively farmed meadows to make them species rich. But I think if you take everything as species rich, it changes the balance with the farm. I think you can't have all, it's got to have that balance between the different ways each are farmed. I'm trying to improve the grazing and reduce fertilizer use, I am planning to put no bagged fertiliser on the whole farm this next year. I'm trying to do direct drilling and all sorts of other regenerative things. But the meadows, they're good how they are. I'm pleased with them, they produce, you know, people want to come and take brush harvested seed and green hay from them to make other fields good. So, I'm happy that the meadows stay how they are really.