

Video Transcript: Farmer Rob Davies describes his flourishing floodplains and how he manages them.

My name is Rob Davies. I farm Seven Meadows Farms, which is based on four farms in the village of Sandhurst, which covers about 800 acres in Sandhurst, and then another couple of hundred acres spread around and about. About a quarter of the main block is meadowland. It's a dairy, beef and arable farm. Our main crops are grass, maize and winter wheat. I was brought up here, I moved away and started farming on my own, went through two county council farms and then came back into the village to take on two county council farms that are put together and the family owned one next door, that was back 20 years ago, and it's expanded from there.

[Caption on screen: How do you manage the floodplains?]

The meadowlands that I farm is farmed in two different ways. The land that's on sort of two of the farms is farmed in a normally intensive way with grassland that's slot-seeded with Italian ryegrass. Some of that would be cut five times a year. We don't use masses of artificial fertiliser. We try to time the farm slurry really well. Some of it was cultivated when I took it on. So, I've carried it on. And another field was a field that was incredibly weedy when I first took that on, like 20 years ago, so we ripped that up, we just use it for growing maize. We have grown spring barley down there, but we try and grow a crop that's got a short growing window to make sure we can get it off timely. All the rest of the grassland if it isn't cut, it's cut and then grazed. And then a further couple of hundred acres of meadows are then farmed in a much more extensive way. No fertiliser, traditionally cut for hay in July, and then grazed afterwards with cattle. And then another section of that is, again, it's not fertilised, but that's then just grazed with cattle right from the start. And on quite an extensive basis. But we find the meadows are very productive. And that system seems to work on that ground. The decision making of when to apply slurry down here, and most years, I wouldn't put slurry on the meadows until after first cut, normally because the ground is not suitable to travel or there's the possibility of flooding. So, we'd hold off, put a small amount of artificial nitrogen on when we could, take the first cut, because the other reason is often you've got a little bit too much leaf down here. And if you put slurry on it, there's a chance that it wouldn't get off the leaf in time for when you cut the silage. So, in a normal year, we'd take the first cut off, then pile the slurry down here and then use that to grow the second cut. And normally the third, but this year is very dry, and it's come very warm and the grass has started to grow. And yeah, we've put slurry on the intensively farmed meadows.

[Caption on screen: How do you integrate the floodplain into the farming system?]

The floodplains have their own unique qualities, but they are integral part of the whole farm and whole farming business. They're farmed hand in hand alongside everything else, a lot of the grass in the meadowland is treated exactly the same way as some of the even more intensive like Italian ryegrass leys, they're cut at the same rate, we cut it all at the same time in a cycle. So, a lot of it is managed, just hand in hand with the rest of the farm. And the same with the areas that are cropped with maize. It's farmed alongside the other arable ground, but obviously not rotated with wheat. And I just have to be a little bit more flexible with my planting and harvesting times, but we do that ourselves anyway. So, it doesn't matter. We're totally flexible. And that's the one thing with meadows you do just have to be prepared to be totally flexible. Nothing's set in stone because you never know what the year is going to

bring. In a in an ideal year, they're very productive. And in a dry year especially, you're really pleased to have the meadows with traditional deep-rooted meadow grass that will just grow even when there's nothing else, cattle will still have a picking, down at the meadows. You've just got to be prepared that some years you've got to take an early late cut because you think it's going to flood or you've got to snatch a crop maize off a little bit early. And you've got to be prepared not to be able to plant stuff early if you're going to grow maize down, but you certainly wouldn't entertain trying to grow winter wheat or something down here, you couldn't guarantee on getting a year without a flood. As far as the anticipation of flooding is concerned, once you've farmed meadows for a long time, you just sort of know. And flood warnings will be put out and you'll think, "yeah, that's not going to go." Or you'll just come down here and you'll look and you think, "well, it's got to go up two foot to get out of its banks, and then it's got to go another 18 inches to get over that bank, that's not gonna happen." And you sort of get a feel for it. And then there's other times once you've heard that there has been 90ml of rain in Lake Vyrnwy and you think, "well, in four days' time, we're gonna get a flood." And that's all about it. And you just know, it's just instinct, I think.

[Caption on screen: Tell us about your hay cutting.]

The hay that we make on the extensively farmed meadows, some of that's used in-house for the cattle, a small amount. Some is used on my livery yards. And there's a proportion sold locally and some sent down to Wales. It makes a very, very nice soft hay that does actually analyse very, very well, very high energy, surprisingly high energy from the grass it's made from. How the wildflowers will look in it, I don't know, they won't affect the eating of it, but they will just affect people's view of it when they look at it. And the bits that are left behind that, especially horses won't eat, you see. So that's something that's yet to be discovered. And also, pushing the cutting date back from the first of July to the 15th adds another problem because you could miss being able to cut those certain meadows before the 15th, in perfectly good weather, and then on the 15th, you could get a wet week or so. And then all of a sudden, you're into wheat harvest and you haven't been able to cut hay. We've already got some bits of land and some arable reversion grass that can't be cut till the 15th. So, we already have got a workload after that date. So that's another little issue, that's just putting a bigger workload that we can't get our teeth into earlier. But we do also make quite a lot of hay on other ground and on some meadows that are under no restrictions, and we can dive into that in the first week of June, if we want to.

[Caption on screen: What are the challenges?]

In a wet year, you haven't got access to your land for a very big window. You know, you could get an early flood at the end of September, October. And that takes a couple of months off your grazing time. And also, you can get a late flood in the spring and you can't get on there with either slurry or fertiliser or anything. And so that shuts your growing window down. On the extensively farmed side, the late spring doesn't have too much of an impact on that, because we're not trying to get on there to push the grass, the grass comes at its own rate. So that is a bonus on that side. Because that's not affected by that. Sort of the mess that flooding brings is quite a big problem with the debris. And also, in some years, you can get a very dirty flood and it can deposit an awful lot of silt. But it all depends on where the water is coming from and how fast it's come out. Sort of the worst thing you can have in a year is three floods. And the last one being the lowest, because then you get three tide-lines you've got to clear up. That can be a good few days' work, just clearing up all the mess, you'll get obviously a lot of wood, a lot of bottles, anything that'll float really. We've had picnic benches, sofas and round bales

arrive in various floods, round bales of silage. We've had all sorts. And a water bowser once. But I knew whose it was, and he had it back! [Laughter.]

[Caption on screen: Where do you go for advice?]

If I'm not sure about something, I'd probably discuss it with some of my friends that also farm in the same sort of circumstances. I'd bounce things off my consultant, and also my seed man from Green Farm Seeds, I'd run things by him as well because he tends to sort of know stuff, but pretty much just make up my own decisions really. Just go on gut instinct. And if I'm wrong, I'm wrong.

[Caption on screen: Are you in any Agri-Environment Schemes?]

I entered into the very last year of the Countryside Stewardship because we were up for renewal that year. So, we pumped for that rather than wait and delve into the unknown. So, we're just on standard Countryside Stewardship and like with various grants for pollarding willows and those sorts of things and we do some pollen and nectar mix and that sort of stuff, alongside some of the water courses that we can't really put any fertiliser on. So, we might as well put it into something useful like that. I'm not sure quite where we'll go in 12 months' time when that scheme ends, but we'll start looking about options soon.

[Caption on screen: Do you have any concerns about the floodplain?]

In later years, it does seem sort of flooding incidents that you'd sort of say, "Oh, well, you'll get a flood in October once in every 10 years," well, we had that happen two years running. Once in a lifetime, you'll get a serious flood. And you know, perhaps once in a lifetime, you'll get an out-of-season flood like you'd get in 2007, which was absolutely catastrophic, because I could stand at one end and look up to 350 acres of meadows that looked like they'd been sprayed off with Roundup, which was horrifying. And anything that hadn't been cut, just took a lifetime to dry out. But anything that had already been cut dried out quite quickly, because the sun and the wind could get to it. But unbelievably, after sort of three weeks, these little green shoots grew up and then the meadows are back to being like this without sowing anything on any of them really. So, meadow grass is quite resilient thing. It takes some killing. I do have concerns with a lot of large housing developments being built in the floodplains or right on the edge of floodplains or their tributaries. I know they're trying to do sort of piecemeal alleviation ponds and things alongside them now. But that does worry me because the runoff is so much faster off stone and concrete and roofs. So, it doesn't give the river such chance to cope. And bear in mind, the river's silted up terribly anyway. So, it can't move as much water as it should be able to move. Yeah, there are, I think, problems could get a little bit worse, we could get more short notice, but short-lasting floods. So, we wouldn't actually be underwater very long, but they're just inconvenient.

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

In relation to the future, I don't really know what's going to be coming out sort of Scheme-wise, there will be opportunities in amongst it, there'll be opportunities for change, the business may well change with my advancing years. So, you know, the time will come that it'll probably downsize a little bit or part of the business. And that may well involve some of the meadowland used for sort of more of a wildlife-enhanced area that I can link in with a sort of wild camping enterprise that sort of would all fit in as one big sort of package. That's one thing I'm looking at for the future. You don't have to farm quite so hard.

You can just be a little more relaxed and have an income stream from that. But the cogs up in my brain are ticking over about that all the time, really.