Guidance for ecological advisors on drafting a farm nature management plan for dairy farming

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Focus on biodiversity/farmland birds:

1. Purpose of the farm nature management plan

The farm nature management plan shows how a dairy farm contributes to nature, landscape and biodiversity and how it complies with the criteria of the Better Life label (BLL).
Three elements are essential for a good plan:

1. **Baseline measurement**
   An overview of the current situation on the farm. Map the current nature and landscape values on the farm, such as the percentage of herb-rich grassland, landscape elements, farmyard planting and existing nature management packages.
2. **Comparison with BLL requirements**[1]
   Which criteria does the farm already meet and which does it not yet meet with regard to biodiversity/farmland birds, as referred to under 'parcels, environmental impact and nature management'.
3. **Action plan**
   Concrete measures (layout and management) that enable the farm to meet the requirements within a defined period.

This structure keeps the plan clear for the farmer and verifiable for the label.

2. Formulating measures

Describe for each component:

- Which measure will be taken;
- Where on the farm;
- When it will be carried out;
- Within what period the farm must comply with the BLL criterion.

3. Use local knowledge tailored to the landscape type

Effective measures are appropriate to the landscape. Tips for the advisor:

- Look at **region-specific landscape elements**. Every landscape has its own characteristics and species. See also the list of native farmyard planting: BLk-inheemse-erfbeplanting-versie-1.0-dd.-10-04-2018-en-GB.pdf
- There is room to allow tailor-made solutions, especially outside meadow bird areas. Align measures to improve habitat quality with the landscape type in which the farm is located (see annex: explanation of landscape type) and with **regional nature objectives**.

[1] Criteria BLL Parcels of land P01-P03, Environmental impact MB01-MB05a en Nature management NA01-NA13 en Manure and minerals MM01-MM05a

- Use knowledge from **provincial plans and information on ANLb**[2] **and Basic Nature Quality**[3,4,5]. The provincial **Nature Management Plan**[6] sets out the province's nature objectives, including those for the agricultural area. Also consult other relevant provincial policy documents on the rural area, agriculture, biodiversity, Basic Nature Quality and meadow birds.
- Various **Dairy Farming Biodiversity Management Packages** (BBM)[7] offer logical guidance for meeting the BLL criteria. See: Home - Beheerpakketten Biodiversiteit Melkveehouderij
- Herb-rich grassland occurs in different types, with differing impacts on biodiversity. In the BLL criteria, the term refers to extensive herb-rich grassland and therefore not to productive herb-rich grassland (see the explanation of herb-rich grassland below and BLk-kuidenrijk-grasland-vernatting-en-bemesting-versie-1.0-dd.-10-04-2019-en-GB.pdf).

4. Work with agricultural collectives wherever possible

The local **Boerennatuur**[8] collective often has:

- Area-specific knowledge;
- Existing area plans;
- Access to subsidies (such as ANLb).

They can advise which management package fits within the management mosaic also applied by other farmers in the area (see annex: explanation of the agricultural collective).
Use the Agricultural Nature and Landscape Management Knowledge Base (ANLb)[9].

5. Discuss the measures with the dairy farmer

Determine whether it is clear to the dairy farmer what needs to be done. Also advise how implementation can be approached with regard to the necessary work, whether or not a permit is required, and the costs and reimbursements involved.

Appendices

[2] Agrarisch Natuurbeheer (ANLb) - BIJ12 among other things, links to the habitat approach and species fact sheets
[3] Aan de slag met Basiskwaliteit Natuur met nieuw kennisdocument
[4] The BKN Conditions Handbook for Rural Areas (to be published in summer 2026) describes how to make BKN practically applicable for farmers, including conditions relating to crop diversity, nutrients, landscape elements, and similar aspects.
[5] De integrale KPI-kernset Duurzame Landbouw: uitwerking voor melkveehouderij en akkerbouw Joan Reijs, Anne van Doorn, Sander Janssen, Marion de Vries, Janjo de Haan, Jan-Paul Wagenaar, Frank Verhoeven, Wouter de Jong, Jantine van Middelkoop, Annelies van Zinderen
[6] For example in the Province of Overijssel:
Bijlage 1a Natuurbeheerplan 2026
Geconsolideerde Beheertypenkaart (Natuurbeheerplan 2025)
[7] Beheerpakketten Biodiversiteit Melkveehouderij
[8] Wie we zijn - BoerenNatuur
[9] Kennisbank Agrarisch Natuur- en Landschapsbeheer (ANLb) - BIJ12

Explanation of landscape type

It is essential that agricultural nature and landscape management matches the relevant landscape type; management must be area-specific.

In the Netherlands, the agricultural area can roughly be divided into arable land and grassland areas, of course with great variety. Landscapes can be subdivided into different landscape types on the basis of various characteristics. A landscape type is a spatial unit in which the physical conditions (relief, soil and water), the reclamation history and/or the characteristic spatial arrangement of landscape elements are the same. Such properties strongly contribute to the identity and attractiveness of the landscape. [10]

OBN[11] experts divide the Netherlands into seven original, natural, terrestrial landscape types, namely: stream valley landscape, dry sandy landscape, dune and coastal landscape, hilly landscape, fenland and marine clay landscape, wet sandy landscape and river landscape. In addition, OBN also distinguishes the cultural landscape.

Unlike most other OBN landscape types, the cultural landscape is not tied to a specific part of the Netherlands. Reclamation created a variety of landscapes in which agricultural use determined the characteristics. [12]
During their cultural-historical development, both water management and soil conditions, and especially the natural vegetation, were heavily adapted to the needs of the developer, in other words the farmer. Nevertheless, the current appearance still shows important traces of the natural landscape before reclamation and of the adjustments made over time, the so-called cultural-historical elements. The various agricultural landscapes in the Netherlands[13] can be recognised by their general appearance, which in turn is the result of the natural conditions (soil, water and natural vegetation cover) and centuries of cultural-historical use. [14]

- Region-specific landscape elements by landscape type;
- Landscapes without a historical reference point (such as Flevoland);

Landscape types can be spatially characterised by[15]: scale (small–large), space (open–closed), structure (irregular–regular), form (varied–uniform), relief (flat–undulating) and historical layering (single-layered–multi-layered).

[10] Landschapstypologie | Compendium voor de Leefomgeving
[11] Over OBN | Natuurkennis
[12] Cultuurlandschap | Natuurkennis
[13] Sandy soils, Wadden Island polders, low peat polders, marine clay polders, peat meadow areas, IJsselmeer polders, floodplains, basins and natural levees, peat colonies, heathland reclamation areas, stream valleys, bocage landscapes, and hilly land.
[14] landschapsecologische-analyse-landschapselementen-in-agrarische-landschappen-van-nederland.pdf
[15] Landschapstypen Nederland in ruimtelijke karakteristieken | Publicatie | Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed

Which management is needed where depends on the specific challenges in a given area. When it comes to protecting specific species, the habitat requirements of those species take priority. However, species with different habitat requirements may then be displaced. Moreover, specific species also depend on all kinds of external influences that are separate from the management carried out, such as high spatial pressure, fragmentation and climate change. For biodiversity restoration, coherence in management at landscape scale is of great importance, but that coherence also depends on the contributions of other farmers and stakeholders in an area.

Basic Nature Quality

Focusing only on specific species and habitats is not enough. This is noted, among other things, in the European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030[16]. Measures must also be taken for more common species and in areas that have not been specifically designated. In the Netherlands, work is therefore under way to further develop the concept of 'Basic Nature Quality'. This concept focuses on creating the right conditions to enable species to remain common or become common again[17]. It concerns:

a) environmental quality (soil, water and air);
b) the quality and design of the landscape;
c) the management and intensity of land use.

The underlying idea is that all nature benefits when the basic quality of rural and urban areas is in good order. In this way, Basic Nature Quality can be a valuable addition to the Birds and Habitats Directives and the Nature Restoration Regulation, but the concept has not yet been adopted in Dutch policy.

Farmers play a key role in managing nature and landscape in agricultural areas, and therefore also in strengthening biodiversity, both for common and for specific species.

Sources on landscape

- Landschapsecologische analyse landschapselementen in agrarische landschappen van Nederland, Staring Advies, 2022
- Aan de slag met Basiskwaliteit Natuur: Toolbox
- Aanvalsplan Landschap
- Is 10% groenblauwe dooradering onrealistisch? LinkedIn, T. Visser,
- Gabriella A. Bishop et al. ,2025. Critical habitat thresholds for effective pollinator conservation in agricultural landscapes.Science389,1314-1319(2025).DOI:10.1126/science.adr2146. See also Nature Today bericht: Nature Today | Met 10 procent leefgebied herstellen bestuivers niet
- Opdam, P. & C.C. Vos, 2023. Hoeveel groenblauwe dooradering is nodig? Landschap 40 (2): 57 – 65.
- Vos, C.C. & P. Opdam, 2022. Groenblauwe dooradering voor natuurinclusieve landbouw en een biodivers platteland. Leuvenheim. Stichting Landschapsnetwerk Brummen.

[16] EU-biodiversiteitsstrategie voor 2030 | EUR-Lex
[17] Rapport-BasiskwaliteitNatuur-Naturalis.pdf

Explanation of herb-rich grassland

Herb-rich grassland is a type of grassland containing more than 15 and up to 40 different plant species distributed across the whole parcel. Extensive herb-rich grassland is characterised by the presence of soil organisms, insects and meadow birds, has an open and diverse structure, is colourful, and is managed year-round with a rest period in spring. These extensive grasslands receive less fertiliser than conventional parcels with perennial ryegrass. In spring, and often in summer as well, the diverse plant species are given the opportunity to flower and set seed [18].

The presence of extensive herb-rich grassland is strongly associated with meadow birds. Extensive herb-rich grassland and ecological/phased management also serve insects in landscapes without meadow birds.

Grassland use strongly determines the composition of grassland vegetation. As long as the influence of fertilisation is overriding, the vegetation consists of only a limited number of grasses and herbs, which are moreover very common. Differences in soil type and moisture conditions are not reflected in the species composition and crop yields remain at a very high level. Only with a lower nutrient status of the soil and a lower crop yield can differences in environmental factors become visible in the grassland composition. Then there is a varied herb-rich grassland that is characteristic of the area. The plant community consists of species that are much less common, accompanied by a wide variation in fauna (butterflies, bees, bumblebees, birds, amphibians, etc.) [19].

When developing herb-rich grassland[20], various phases and grassland types can be distinguished (see Figure 1).

CODE	GRASLANDTYPE	OPBRENGST (ton ds/ha)	SOORTEN (per 25m²)	KWALIFICATIE
	START- EN TUSSENFASEN			
00	Engels raaigrasakker	> 12	< 5	extreem soortenarm
0	Engels raaigrasland	> 10	5 – 10	zeer soortenarm
1	Grassenmix	8 – 10	10 – 15	soortenarm
2d	Dominant-stadium*	6 – 8	10 – 12	soortenarm
2	Grassenmix-plus	7 – 9	12 – 17	vrij soortenarm
	KRUIDENRIJK GRASLAND			
3	Gras-kruidenmix	5 – 7	15 – 25	vrij soortenrijk
4	Bloemrijk grasland	3 – 6	20 – 40	soortenrijk
5	Schraalland	< 5	> 30	soortenrijk

Figure 1 Grassland types. Source: Field guide to developing herb-rich grassland – Wim Schippers (2023)

[18] Kruidenrijk grasland - BoerenNatuur
[19] Veldgids Ontwikkelen van kruidenrijk grasland – Wim Schippers (2012)
[20] Ontwikkeling kruidenrijk(er) grasland - BoerenNatuurWijzer

In addition to these extensive herb-rich grasslands, farmers also opt for productive herb-rich grassland. In extensive herb-rich grassland, biodiversity enhancement is the primary objective, with growing feed at a stable yield as a secondary objective; in productive herb-rich grassland, this is the other way round.

The diversity of plant species is higher in productive herb-rich grassland than in permanent grassland, but productive herb-rich grasslands are very similar to one another. Extensive herb-rich grassland has the highest number of plant species and the highest number of unique species. In terms of fauna, the diversity of insects and birds is greatest in extensive herb-rich grassland, followed by productive herb-rich grassland and then permanent grassland. The low intensity of land use in extensive herb-rich grassland allows many insects to complete their full life cycle there and provides sufficient peace and quiet for birds to incubate their nests.

At present, the definition of herb-rich grassland in BLL Dairy Cattle is not concrete[21]. Under criterion P03 'percentage of herb-rich grassland', no clear requirements are set for the quantity or the number of species. We propose using species richness of at least 15 species of grasses and herbs per 25 m^2, with good distribution across the entire parcel, as the criterion[22].

Therefore, the 'qualitative condition' of herb-rich grassland is important for its ecological value. Management measures (such as grazing, fertilisation and rewetting) can serve as practical guidelines/advice in a manual or background document. The standards for grazing (NA03), cultivation (NA04), rewetting (NA05), maximum spring fertilisation (MM04 and a) and similarly for artificial fertiliser (MM05a) form the guidance.

Under the ANLb package 'extensive herb-rich grassland', the minimum presence of 4 indicator species[23] is used as an assessment criterion for appropriate management aimed at sufficiently reducing fertilisation.

Sources on herb-rich grassland:

- Schippers, W., I. Bax & M. Gardenier (2012). Ontwikkelen van kruidenrijk grasland. Aardewerk Advies, Frouws, Ede.
- Kruidenrijk grasland: biodiversiteit en productie, Louis Bolk, Butterfly Foundation, WUR, 2024
- Kruidenrijk grasland: werken aan een balans tussen biodiversiteit en productie | Louis Bolk Instituut
- Herb-rich Grassland Factsheet, BoerenNatuur: DC4.1.1-Factsheets-kruidenrijk-grasland.pdf
- Indicator species list Anlb: Lijsten-indicatorsoorten-2023.pdf

[21] There should, however, be a reference to Management Package 5: extensive herb-rich grassland. A reference to the "marshy area" management package is only relevant in meadow bird areas, and only in combination with extensive herb-rich grassland with a rest period and other management packages for meadow birds.
[22] Biodiversiteitsmonitor & Schippers, 2014
[23] Lijsten-indicatorsoorten-2023.pdf

Explanation of the agricultural collective

Agricultural collectives draw up area plans for agricultural nature and landscape management in order to apply to the provinces for budgets to pay management subsidies to farmers participating in agricultural nature and landscape management in the relevant area. In that sense, the collectives have a plan for these areas in mind when they advise individual farms on measures for nature and landscape. It therefore makes sense to use their expertise when drawing up or reviewing farm nature management plans.
Farmers who are members of a collective can often make use of this. This strengthens the quality of the plans and increases support. Moreover, an individual farm has limited influence on improving biodiversity in an area. It is precisely the collaboration of multiple farms in the same area, working towards a common goal with measures jointly aligned to that goal, that offers a much greater chance of success.

You can find a collective near you on this website:

- Wie we zijn - BoerenNatuur

Other sources

- Biodiversiteitsmonitor Melkveehouderij: Biodiversiteitsmonitor Melkveehouderij
- van Doorn, A., Erisman, J. W., Melman, D., van Eekeren, N., Lesschen, J. P., Visser, T., & Blanken, H. (2019). Drempel-en streefwaarden voor de KPI's van de Biodiversiteitsmonitor melkveehouderij: Normeren vanuit de ecologie. (Wageningen Environmental Research rapport; No. 2968). Wageningen Environmental Research. https://doi.org/10.18174/505122
- Sharps, E., R. Hawkes, A. Bladon, D. Buckingham, J. Border, A. Morris, P. Grice & W. Peach, 2023. Reversing declines in farmland birds: How much agri-environment provision is needed at farm and landscape scales?. Journal of Applied Ecology. 60. 10.1111/1365-2664.14338.
- Staring Advies (2022). Landschapsecologische analyse landschapselementen in agrarische landschappen van Nederland.
- Toolbox Basiskwaliteit Natuur: Basiskwaliteit Natuur | Deltaplan Biodiversiteitsherstel