

Water Margins in Arable Fields

This is an old version of the page

Date published: 30 November, 2018

Date superseded: 15 December, 2025

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the [bottom of the page](#).

Aim

The aim of this option is to benefit a variety of wildlife, and help improve water quality.

Water margins immediately adjacent to still or running water, including ditches which may be dry for part of the year, can help improve water quality by preventing soil erosion, intercepting surface water run-off and improving soil structure.

Water margins can also provide cover and food for birds and small mammals as well as flowers for pollinating insects, and are important for connecting habitats.

Eligibility

Any land in an arable rotation adjacent to still or flowing water (e.g. rivers, burns, ditches or lochs) where you propose to create a water margin, or an existing water margin immediately adjacent to land in an arable rotation, is eligible.

For the purposes of this option, arable land is land which has been in crop for at least three of the past five years.

You can manage **any** width of water margin, but the following **minimums** apply (along the entire length of the margin):

Location of water margin	Minimum width of water margin*
Adjacent to a watercourse with a bed width less than or equal to 1.2 metres	3 metres
Adjacent to a watercourse with a bed width greater than 1.2 metres	6 metres
Adjacent to still water	12 metres

* The minimum width applies from the top of the bank.

Spatial targeting



[Map of target area – Water Margins in Arable Fields \(PDF, Size: 1.1 MB\)](#)

doc_external_url: <https://www.ruralpaymentsandservices.org/media/resources/87332-AECS-Review---2018-map---Water-margins-in-arable-fields.pdf> This option is available within the target area shown on this map.

You can check if this option is available on your holding using the search targeting tool which can be found on any of the following AECS guidance pages:

[AECS Home](#)

[Eligibility](#)

[How to Apply](#)

[Management Options and Capital Items](#)

[Capital Items](#)

Application requirements

You must identify on a map the location(s) of any water margins to be managed.

Complete the template below to describe all your water margins.

For margins of 6 metres or wider if you do not intend to graze or cut your margin, you must include detailed justification with your application and your case officer will assess if the justification is acceptable.



[Water Margins – summary table \(MS Word, Size: 15.7 kB\)](#)

doc_external_url: <https://www.ruralpaymentsandservices.org/media/resources/AECS---Water-Margins---Summary-Table---November-2018-Update.docx>

Management requirements

This option must remain at the same location(s) for the duration of your contract.

Where you need to create a water margin you must do so by 1 June in the first year of your contract.

For water margins of at least three metres and less than six metres

- you must exclude all livestock
- if cutting, you must not cut before 15 August and you must remove cuttings (with the exception of topping to aid establishment during the first year)

For water margins of six metres or wider

- you must cut and / or graze the area, unless you have prior approval not to
- if cutting, you must not cut before 15 August and you must remove cuttings (with the exception of topping to aid establishment during the first year). You are only required to cut the margin from the top of the bank
- if grazing, you must not graze the margin or associated banking between 1 May and 15 August, or between 1 May and 15 September if the land is within a bathing water catchment
- do not carry out supplementary livestock feeding

For all water margins

- once the margin has been established, do not plough, cultivate or use the area for storage
- do not allow the area to become poached or vehicle tracked
- do not apply fertiliser, slurry or farmyard manure
- do not establish new drainage
- do not spray, except for the spot-treatment of injurious weeds (requires prior written notification) or treatment of invasive species (requires prior written approval).
- you must maintain a diary

Payment

You can claim £495.62 per hectare per year.

The maximum eligible width of a margin is 18 metres.

The maximum width you can claim is 18 metres next to a watercourse. This is because only activity which is in excess of legal requirement (e.g. GAEC / GBRs) is eligible for payment. Under GAEC 1 you must not cultivate or apply pesticides within two metres of the top of the bank of a watercourse. The eligible area for this option will start from the edge of this two metre strip. This will mean that if you manage a 20 metre wide margin from the top of the bank of a watercourse, only 18 metre of the margin (20 metres minus two metres) would be eligible for payment.

There is a separate capital payment to support the creation of water margins:

- [Creation of Grass Strips and Water Margins in Arable Fields](#)

Inspections

The inspectors will check:

- the margin is in an arable field
- the margin is at least the appropriate minimum width for the bed width of the watercourse
- all grass strips must be in place by the 1 June

For water margins of at least three metres and less than six metres

- that all livestock has been excluded
- if cutting, it must not have been cut before 15 August and cuttings have been removed (with the exception of topping to aid establishment during the first year)

For water margins of six metres or wider

- you must cut and / or graze the area, unless you have prior approval not to
- if cutting, you must not cut before 15 August and you must remove cuttings (with the exception of topping to aid establishment during the first year). You are only required to cut the margin from the top of the bank
- if grazing, you must not graze the margin or associated banking between 1 May and 15 August, or between 1 May and 15 September if the land is within a bathing water catchment
- do not carry out supplementary livestock feeding

For all water margins

- there has been no ploughing, cultivation or storage
- the area has not become poached or vehicle tracked
- you have not sprayed, unless with prior written notification or approval as appropriate
- you have maintained a diary
- there has been no application of fertiliser, slurry or farmyard manure

Note

If you choose to apply for this option over the same area of land that you are allocating as an Ecological Focus Area to meet your Pillar 1 greening requirements, there may be an issue of [double funding](#).

Additional guidance

[Supporting guidance is available for this option.](#)

Recent changes

Section	Change
Spatial targeting	Updated target map

Previous versions

[Previous versions of this page](#)

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