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Start planning ahead for new grant funding

With over £3 billion of new grant funding for farmers and rural businesses on the horizon, agricultural business consultants Brown & Co urge farmers in the eastern region to start planning ahead.

"Since June 2006, grant funding for rural projects has been limited to say the least," says agricultural business consultant Simon Wearmouth, who is based at Brown & Co's Norwich office.

The replacement Rural Development Programme, which aims to safeguard and enhance the rural environment and foster competitive and sustainable businesses and thriving rural communities, is expected to be introduced this side of Christmas. Operating under the title of the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) the new programme has a budget of £3.9 billion and will run from 2007 to 2013.

As well as securing funding for existing agri-environmental schemes, there will be new opportunities for farmers to apply for grants to help with new Energy Crop Schemes as well as a new programme of Socio Economic funding.

Nationally agri-environmental schemes, including Entry and Higher Level Stewardship and Organic Entry Level Stewardship, have been allocated £3.3 billion. Meanwhile £600 million will be set aside to make agriculture and forestry more competitive and sustainable and to fund projects to enhance opportunity in rural areas.

The new programme of Socio Economic funding, which effectively replaces the old ERDP Project Based Schemes including the Rural Enterprise Scheme and Processing and Marketing Grant, has set priorities including improving business efficiency, creation of new markets and products and new businesses and encouraging enterprises in the rural economy.

“Our Norwich business consultancy team was closely involved with the previous ERDP schemes, particularly the Rural Enterprise Scheme, and we were successful in securing in excess of £2 million of grant funding for clients,” says Simon Wearmouth. “In preparation for the launch of the new scheme, we recommend early discussions to ensure schemes are developed where possible to fulfil the necessary eligibility criteria.”

The new scheme aims to attract projects that involve businesses sharing objectives and collaborative working. Proposals put forward by individual businesses that meet the priority objectives will also be considered where they demonstrate a collaborative approach.

“Although the new scheme will require a change of mindset from the old system, it does present an opportunity to secure grant funding to support the launch of new ventures,” says Simon Wearmouth.

The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has worked closely with Natural England and Forestry Commission to develop the Regional Implementation Plan. This sets out the objectives for RDPE in the region. EEDA is awaiting European Commission formal approval. It is anticipated that approval will be given and the Programme launched before the end of the year.

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