



Agri-environment scheme impact on improving the condition of lowland heathland in England

Alonso, I¹ & Hewins, E²

Is there evidence that HLS has delivered positive effects for lowland heathland?

NATURAL
ENGLAND



Maintenance

227 agr.

8,771 ha

£13.6M

Restoration from neglect

523 agr.

36,023 ha

£40.5M

Restoration from Forestry

106 agr.

1,698 ha

£2.4M

Creation from arable

27 agr.

240 ha

£0.9M

Creation from mineral sites

4 agr.

16 ha

£21k

2005-2015

657 HLS Agreements

46,747 ha

£57.4M

How could we find out? The sample



SSSI = Site of Special Scientific Interest
HLS = Higher Level Stewardship

	HLS	SSSI
Heaths in	32,744 ha (64%)	78%
Heaths not in	18,231 ha (36 %)	22%

	Sample	Sites	Stands
▲	Non-SSSI – HLS	31	31
△	Non-SSSI – Non-HLS	28	28
●	SSSI – HLS	55	65
○	SSSI – Non-HLS	29	30

How did we assess vegetation condition?

NATURAL
ENGLAND



% Bare ground

Vegetation
Structure

Vegetation
Composition

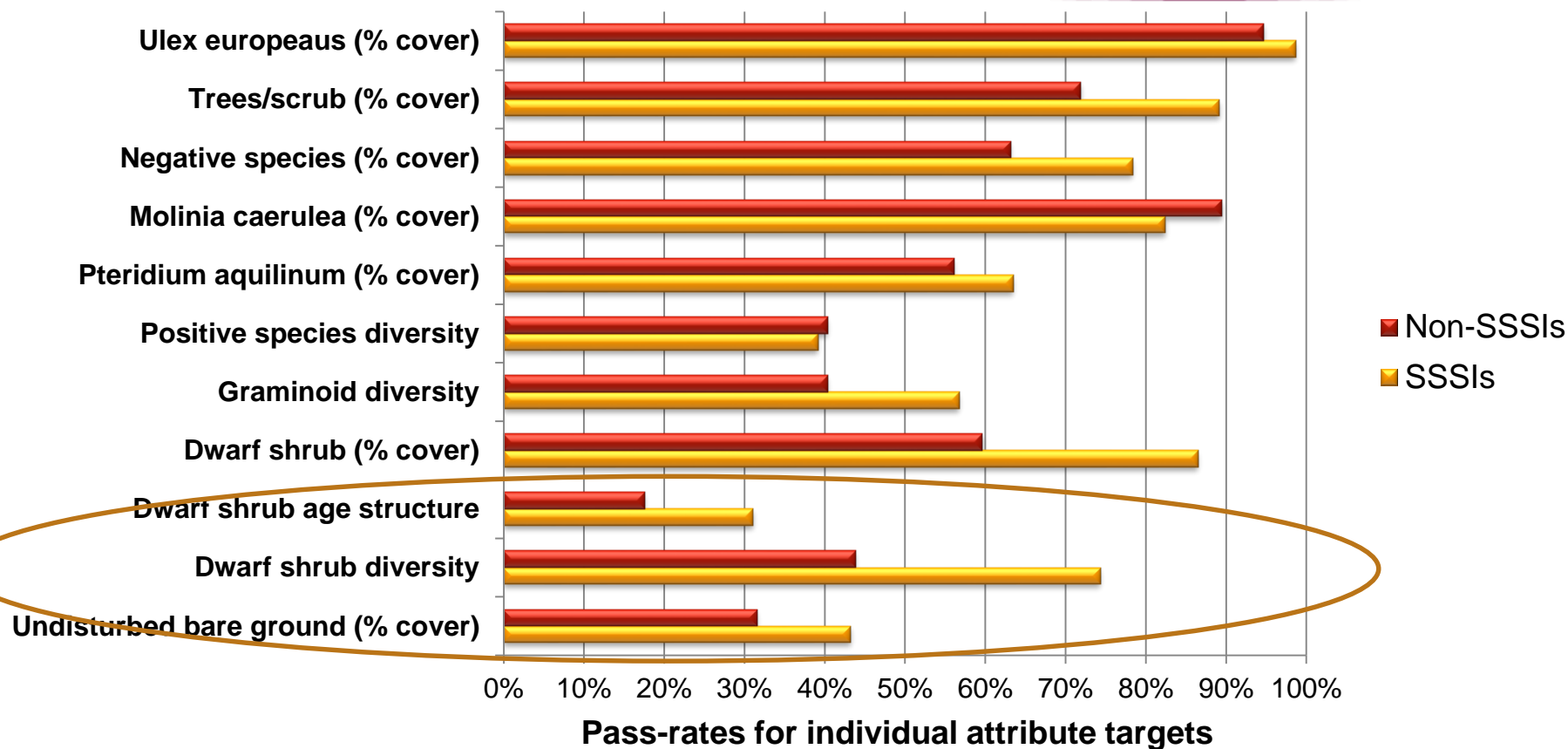
Negative
indicators

Other habitat features
(burrows, microcliffs, etc.)

Signs of management
(cutting, burning, grazing, etc.)

Managers survey
(ownership, understanding of scheme,
barriers, satisfaction with results...)

Designated sites were in better condition than non designated ones

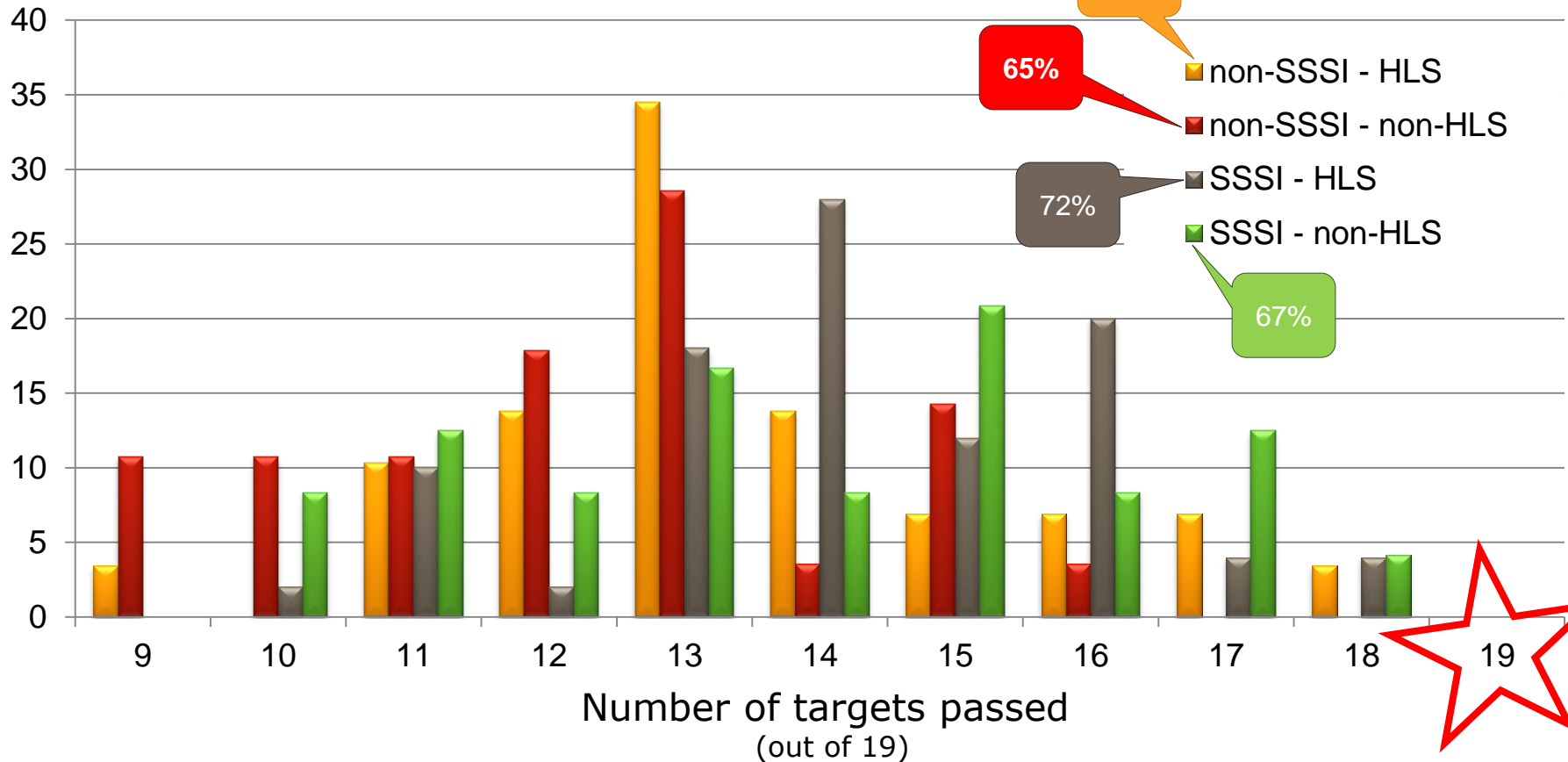


But very low pass rates for important attributes: vegetation structure, ericaceous diversity and bare ground.

Sites under agreement were in slightly better condition than those without agreement

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Percentage

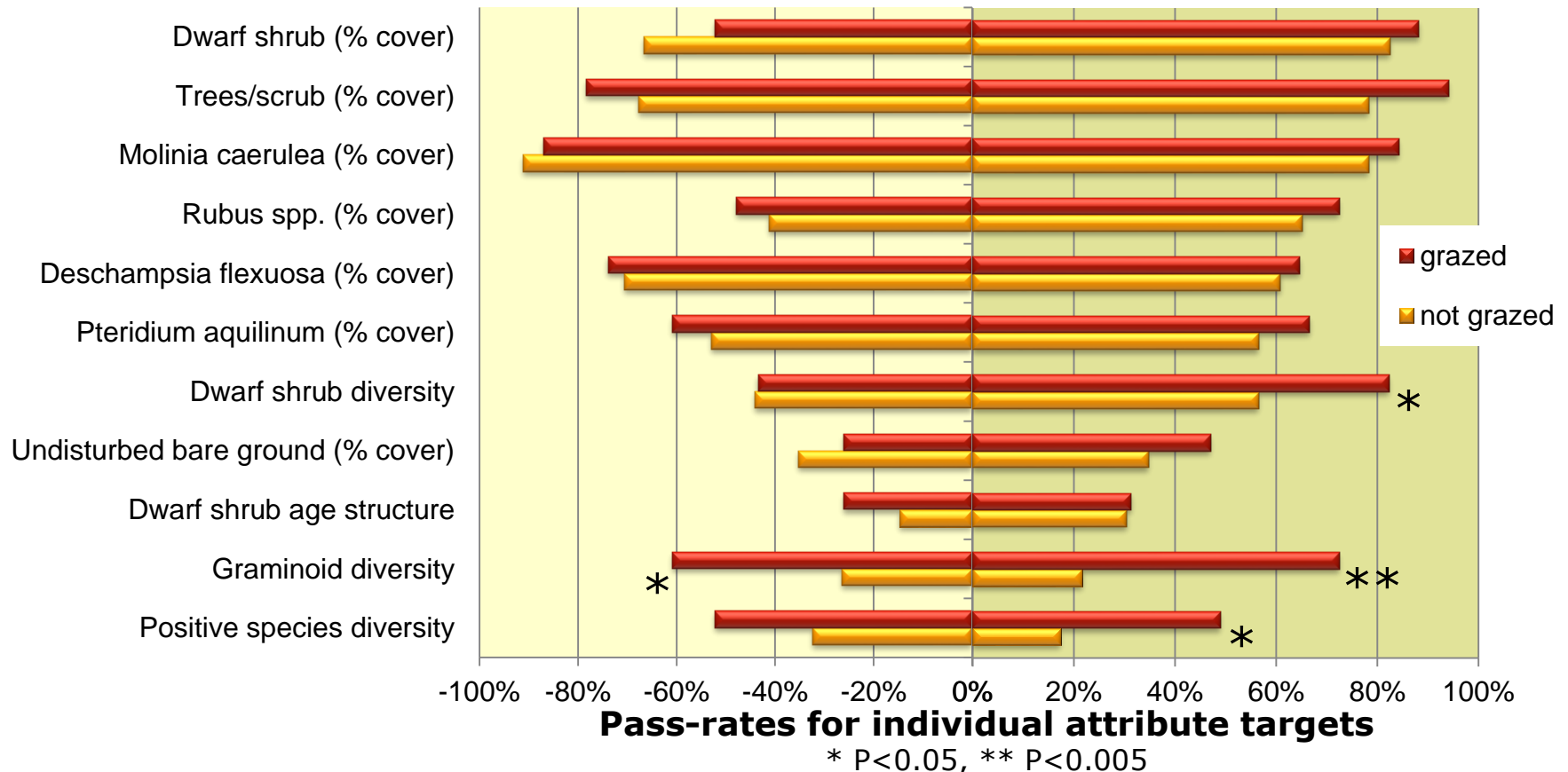


But no site passed all targets.

Grazed sites were in better condition than those ungrazed

Non-SSSIs

SSSIs

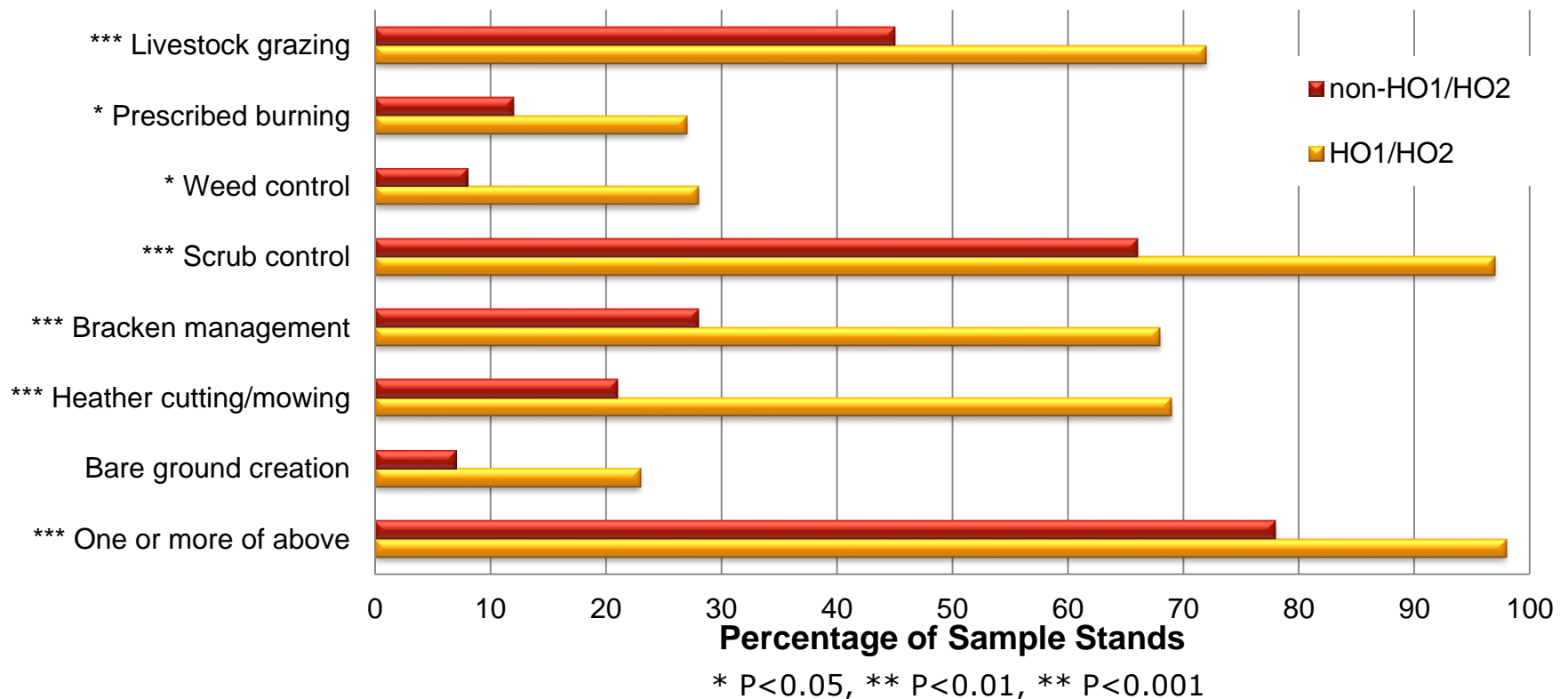


Grazed designated sites presented the best condition of the sample

What were the general impacts of the agreements?



Sites within agreements had more positive management, resulting in more condition targets improving (more bare soil, positive indicators increasing and negative decreasing).



What do we need to improve going forward?



- Some attributes changed in the opposite way as expected – further scrutiny of why is needed.
- Important structural attributes are not always achieved.
- Need to engage further with agreement holders to ensure they have the support and advice they need.



What's the future of Agri-environment schemes for heathlands?



- Commitment to adopt as rigorous a methodology as possible to setting goals and reporting success or failure.
- Post-Brexit agri-environment schemes will reward good environmental practice and encourage imaginative and environmentally enriching alternatives.
- There will be more support for woodland creation and tree planting to meet our aim of eleven million more trees: we need to ensure they go in the right places, not on heathlands.
- Understanding how to create and protect habitats should be as much a part of good farming as understanding the latest crop and soil science.



Thank You!

Natural England is responsible for delivering a programme of monitoring and evaluation, working closely with Defra and others to meet the requirements of schemes delivered and funded through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). The Heathland ESME project was part of this programme.