

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

FARMING AND THE ENVIRONMENT



The Voice of the Countryside

House of Commons, Westminster Hall Debate

“Interdependence of modern farming and the environment” (Colin Clark, Con, Gordon)

Tuesday 12 March, 2.30-4.00pm

Introduction:

- The food and farming industry is nationally important, generating over £108 billion a year for the UK economy and underpinning our food security. It is particularly important for our most rural areas where farming is often central to the economic and social life of the community, as well as playing a vital role in conservation.
- Our new agricultural policy outside the EU must start with the objective of securing a productive and competitive farming industry by looking at ways of supporting farmers in their task of producing food. The environmental public goods that the Government wants to reward in a new agricultural policy, such as improved air quality, climate change mitigation, and increased biodiversity, are sound objectives but they cannot be achieved without working with farmers to deliver them.
- Unless we recognise the dual role of farmers as food producers and conservationists then we risk turning farmers into environmental contractors – receiving support payments for providing environmental outcomes – with little incentive to continue farming, which would be damaging to the jobs and communities that depend on farming as well as weakening our food security.

Role of farmers in conservation:

- Many areas of our countryside look ‘wild’ but the vast majority of landscapes around the British Isles are the result of existing management from farmers and other land managers, which has developed over many centuries. Through the maintenance of fields, walls and hedges, woodlands and other landscape features, farmers and other land managers play an important role in creating and maintaining some of our most iconic rural landscapes, including National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Using the skills and experience of farmers is often the best way to improve biodiversity and secure the future of our vital natural resources. If farming in upland, and other marginal areas, were to be abandoned because of changes to support payments, there would be detrimental effects on the habitat in these areas and the species they support.
- The conservation work of farmers is often supported by other forms of land management, such as the work of grouse moor managers. Management of moorland for grouse shooting has been carried out for over 150 years and provides a valuable habitat for a variety of species. More than 80 per cent of English grouse moors fall within a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and are popular for outdoor pursuits. Grouse moors are sustainably managed, largely through private investment by their owners who spend

approximately £52.5 million every year on moorland management and support the equivalent of 1,500 full-time jobs. Grouse moors also bolster the economy of upland areas by attracting tourists and boosting tourism-related revenue. Income generated from grouse shooting supports future land management, remote rural communities and the maintenance of traditional moorland skills. Any new agricultural policy should seek to accommodate and work with other upland land management practices, including shooting.

- We are concerned by suggestions that existing management should be withdrawn or scaled back as part of a policy of 'rewilding'. Supporters of 'rewilding' often see farming as an obstacle to conservation, but this ignores its benefit in many areas. For example, low intensity grazing plays a valuable role in preserving the Lake District's environment, which is home to extensive areas of rare habitat, internationally important rivers and lakes, and a key source of drinking water for cities in the North West of England. If remote areas in the UK were to be abandoned as part of a policy of 'rewilding' they would soon revert to scrub or woodland which would threaten some of our rarest moorland and grassland habitats.
- In many cases, 'rewilding' land management practices result in the loss of agricultural land or a reduction in its productivity. Land that is flooded as part of managed river and coastal flooding will be difficult to restore if there is a change in policy and the reintroduction of apex predators such as lynx and wolves can also make the land less productive by increasing predation. Any economic advantages claimed by proponents of 'rewilding' do not outweigh the potential loss of income to existing businesses, the social impact resulting from a loss of traditional employment, or the possible damage to existing landscapes.
- There is no single definition of 'rewilding'. A report from the House of Commons Environmental Audit Select Committee in January 2017 stated their preferred definition was "...reducing human intervention in some areas, preferably in a planned way, so that natural environmental processes will have more scope to shape the composition and structure of such landscapes...". The Committee acknowledged that 'rewilding' was a contested term and concluded that there was not enough evidence to recommend a general policy on this after we leave the EU, which we welcomed. However, we are concerned by the Report's suggestion that rewilding "may arise out of necessity" if changes to support payments or unfavourable trade deals "lead to less land being viable for profitable farming" after we leave the EU.

Upland farmers

- Farmers in the uplands, and other marginal areas, are generally limited to low intensity grazing which has small profit margins and is often more exposed to market volatility than other sectors of the industry. Without direct income support, many hill farmers will struggle to make a profit even with income from diversification. Their work, however, often provides the most amount of public good in creating and maintaining some of our most iconic rural landscapes which support many of our rarest habitats and wildlife and are central to rural tourism, which is worth £19 billion a year to the UK economy.
- England's uplands currently receive £230 million per annum from the CAP. As a minimum this total needs to be guaranteed long term to secure the future of upland farming. The transition from CAP to a new agricultural policy must not be used to reduce the amount of funding to upland communities.
- The Secretary of State's speeches have praised upland farmers, but the Agriculture Bill and Explanatory Notes provide no assurance that the farming systems that deliver our much loved landscapes will be supported, and there is no mention of "landscape" in Part

1 of the Bill which sets out the public goods that will be supported under the new Environmental Land Management scheme. This is disappointing given the Government's Health and Harmony consultation contained a whole section on "supporting rural communities and remote farming".

- The Countryside Alliance has worked with a cross-party group of MPs to help table an amendment to the Agriculture Bill (amendment 29) to provide the Secretary of State with specific powers to provide financial assistance for the purpose of "supporting upland landscapes and communities" in England. A similar amendment has been tabled relating to the powers for Welsh Ministers in Schedule 3 of the Bill. We hope the Government will respond to these amendments favourably when the Bill returns to the Commons for Report stage (date to be confirmed).
- There are already different payments for farmers in "Less Favoured Areas" under the CAP so the principle that upland farmers require greater financial support has already been established, and we strongly believe this principle should be continued in any new agricultural policy outside the EU.

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