

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE



Upland Farming Amendment to the Agriculture Bill

Amendment 29

House of Commons Report Stage, date to be confirmed

Background:

- Our uplands have been shaped by farmers and other land managers over many centuries. Without a continuation of farming many iconic rural landscapes would be lost with negative consequences for rural communities, wildlife and habitats and the tourist industry. The important connection between landscape and people was recognised by UNESCO in their designation of the Lake District as a World Heritage Site which stated: “The combined work of nature and human activity has produced a harmonious landscape in which the mountains are mirrored in the lakes”.
- Farmers in the uplands are generally limited to low intensity grazing which has a small profit margin and is often more exposed to market volatility than other sectors of the farming industry. Even with financial support for delivering environmental/public goods and funds to boost productivity, many upland farmers may still struggle to be profitable.
- The Countryside Alliance has worked with a cross-party group of MPs to help table an amendment to the Agriculture Bill to provide the Secretary of State with specific powers to provide financial assistance for the purpose of supporting upland landscapes and communities in England. The Secretary of State, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, has acknowledged that sustaining upland landscapes and communities is a public good and we would like to see this recognised on the face of the Bill.
- The Bill provides the framework for future policy but much of the detail defining the environmental/public goods set out in the Bill will be left to secondary legislation and the judgement of civil servants. The only way to ensure that specific policies can be developed to support upland landscapes and communities, is by having this provision written into the legislation. The amendment has been tabled for consideration at Report Stage of the Bill and we hope it will gain the support of as many MPs as possible.

The Amendment:

- The amendment is set out below:

Clause 1, page 2, line 8, at end insert—
“(h) supporting upland landscapes and communities.”

Member’s explanatory statement

This amendment would provide the Secretary of State the power to give financial assistance for the purpose of supporting upland landscapes and communities in England.

- The amendment would appear in the Bill as overleaf:

PART 1
NEW FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE POWERS

1 Secretary of State's powers to give financial assistance

(1) The Secretary of State may give financial assistance for or in connection with any of the following purposes—

- (a) managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment;
- (b) supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment;
- (c) managing land or water in a way that maintains, restores or enhances cultural heritage or natural heritage;
- (d) mitigating or adapting to climate change;
- (e) preventing, reducing or protecting from environmental hazards;
- (f) protecting or improving the health or welfare of livestock;
- (g) protecting or improving the health of plants;
- (h) supporting upland landscapes and communities.

Purpose of Amendment:

- Despite a separate section on “supporting rural communities and remote farming” in the Government’s Health and Harmony consultation, there are no references in the Bill to upland farming or upland landscapes. Financial assistance could be provided under Part 1, 1(1)(c) for “restoring or enhancing cultural heritage or natural heritage”, but this is too vague and there should be a specific power to support upland landscapes and communities.
- By including a power to support upland landscapes and communities, the Secretary of State will have the ability to develop specific schemes and policies to support hill farming which will be much needed with the withdrawal of direct income support.
- There are a number of policies that could be considered by including this power in the Bill, including an upland farmers’ allowance, specific payments in future agriculture policy to support upland landscapes, and funds to support communities in those areas by funding digital infrastructure and skills training etc. Without this specific power in the Bill, these policies may not be possible.
- There is a concern that many of the environmental/public goods currently set out in Part 1 of the Bill will require a change of land use, i.e. planting trees. Recognising upland landscapes and communities on the face of the Bill will enable policies to be developed that provide funds to maintain the status quo in those areas without forcing farmers into a change of land use in order to qualify for financial assistance.
- The amendment would provide the opportunity to hold this and future governments to account if the implementation of agricultural policy failed to address the interests of upland farmers and their communities.

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