

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: IMPACT OF LAND USE CHANGE ON FOOD SECURITY

Westminster Hall, Wendy Morton MP

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- **A recent government consultation set out the expectation that 14% of England's current agricultural land would see a significant reduction or total loss of food production by 2050. The document states that land use change is required in order to *"make space for nature, water, and emissions reduction, while also delivering new infrastructure and housing and maintaining food production"*.**
- **The proposed approach would seem to be an advance over taking prime agricultural land out of production for use as sites for renewable energy generation and afforestation. This current trend must not just be halted but reversed.**
- **The Countryside Alliance welcomes the statement that decisions must be fit for the long term. Long-term decision-making relies upon the recognition that where change of use affects the viability of generating revenue through the market, there must be certainty over how its continued management will be funded.**
- **Much land management decision-making is so long-term as to be multi-generational. We have argued that the government should revisit the changes to the inheritance tax regime as announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget.**
- **Domestic food security is national security and must be protected. Any reduction in available agricultural land must be offset by increased productivity, with account taken of population growth.**
- **Large-scale land use change, and the benefits envisaged from it, cannot be delivered without the support and work of practitioners. The government cannot deliver its environmental targets without those who own and manage the land.**

Background

- Between 30 January and 25 April 2025 the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural affairs ran a consultation on a new framework for land use in England¹, to which the Countryside Alliance responded.²
- The consultation document set out the expectation that 14% of England's current agricultural land would see a significant reduction or total loss of food production by 2050. This figure consisted of 9% of agricultural land (760 kha) becoming non-agricultural and being fully dedicated to delivering environmental and climate benefits, plus 5% (430 kha) being farmed mainly for other benefits than food, with limited food production.

¹ Defra, [Land Use Consultation](#), 01.25

² Countryside Alliance, [Alliance responds to land use consultation](#), 24.04.25

- In addition, it envisages that a further 1% (50 kha) would undergo small changes maintaining the same agricultural land use, and 4% would undergo more substantial change, primarily involving the planting of trees alongside agricultural production.
- The document went on to state:

“The Government is committed to maintaining food production. Our assessment is that, based on historical trends of productivity improvement, and supported by new and emerging innovations, the impact of these land use changes on domestic food production will be offset by productivity improvements. We expect that recent trends of increased productivity from agricultural land will continue.”

- A related case was made in the APPG for Science and Technology in Agriculture report, *Feeding Britain Sustainably to 2050: The 30:50:50 Mission*, published this month, which argued for a unified effort to increase UK agricultural output by 30% by 2050.³

The requirement for land use change

- The land use consultation document states that land use change is required in order to *“make space for nature, water, and emissions reduction, while also delivering new infrastructure and housing and maintaining food production”*. Changes, it argues:

“are critical to make agriculture and food production more resilient to climate change. They are also necessary to meet our statutory Carbon Budgets under the Climate Change Act and statutory environmental targets under the Environment Act.”

- The Countryside Alliance does not have the expert capacity in the scientific or assessment basis underpinning these proposals for a Land Use Framework. Based on the evidence supplied in the consultation document and Analytical Annex we acknowledge that the assessment appears reasonable.
- However, the consultation documents acknowledge considerable uncertainty. It also remains to be seen how the specified objectives are to be delivered and whether such delivery will achieve the various relevant statutory and non-statutory targets.
- The burden of delivering any resulting strategy for land use change will overwhelmingly fall on private landowners and land managers.
- The most significant land-use change outlined in the documents is the 14% of land area that will see serious or complete loss of agricultural production, and we are concerned to ensure that overall agricultural productivity loss is minimised and does not undermine food security.
- The proposed approach would seem to be an advance over current land use practice, which we regret has to date involved taking prime agricultural land out of production for use as sites for renewable energy generation and afforestation. This current trend must not just be halted but reversed.

³ Science for Sustainable Agriculture, [Feeding Britain Sustainably to 2050 - The 30:50:50 Mission](#), 11.25

Principles of land use change

- The consultation document outlines six principles that it argues should underpin strategic special planning and the targeting of land use incentives. These are co-design with local and regional representatives, enabling land to be multi-functional, playing to the strengths of the land, making decisions that are fit for the long term and designing policy to be responsive to new data, opportunities and pressures.
- The Countryside Alliance has no particular objection to the proposed principles and especially welcomes the statement that decisions must be fit for the long term, with the caveat that they should also be kept under review.
- Noting the principle of playing to the strengths of the land, we would question the aesthetic impact of radical change on certain landscapes and how it may impact tourism and other interests. For example, well-loved upland landscapes appear as they do as a result of human management over centuries connected to hill farming, and while they may be less agriculturally productive, they are considered iconic parts of the UK landscape and are hugely attractive to visitors.
- The Analytical Annex values the annual benefits of natural capital at £37bn, stating that more than half this figure derives from cultural services such as nature-based recreation and tourism.
- Lastly, we argued in our consultation response that the government should adopt an additional principle of avoiding increased reliance on food imports resulting from land use change, which was discussed in the documents but we believe should be placed at the forefront.

Policy recommendations

- The consultation asked what policies, incentives and other changes are needed to deliver land use change as described.
- Long-term decision-making relies upon the recognition that where the market is no longer a viable source of revenue from a given area of land due to change of use, there must be certainty over how its continued management will be funded. Farmers' recent experiences with agricultural transition funding, specifically the sudden closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme, have undermined confidence in long-term planning and sufficient revenue streams.
- Decisions on land management need to be taken over the long-term, especially where significant investment is being made. Much land management decision-making is so long-term as to be multi-generational, and for that reason, we argued that the government should revisit the changes to the inheritance tax regime as announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget.
- One possible policy action would be to offer a future inheritance tax incentive in exchange for investment in nature recovery, which would provide a powerful incentive for private investment without an immediate cost to the public purse.
- The government must appreciate that farms are businesses and not charities, and as such, it must recognise the importance of maintaining their commercial viability. It should work directly with people who own and manage land to ensure the land holding remains

economically viable, in addition to providing environmental and other benefits. We cannot end up with parts of landholdings ceasing to be economically productive, resulting in a loss of viability for the entire holding.

- Land use change should be monitored and done in such a way that it is reversible, so that land can be taken back into agricultural production if needed in the future. It should also be kept under review, bearing in mind the possibility of a changing climate altering the suitability of land over time, for example, by shifting northwards the most suitable land for crop production.
- The Countryside Alliance agrees with the principle that domestic food security is national security and must be protected. Any reduction in available agricultural land must be offset by increased productivity, with account taken of population growth. This may require deliberately leaving the best and most productive land for agricultural use, considering local land suitability, such as that of the East of England for arable farming and the South West for dairy.
- In general, we believe that tax incentives are likely to be the most effective means of promoting private investment. However, we recognise the importance of proper targeting and avoiding over-incentivisation that could risk encouraging greenwashing, tax-avoiding corporations to acquire large-scale landholdings and implementing environmental schemes of dubious overall benefit. There should be an ongoing commitment to involving and supporting communities, especially where their residents rely for their livelihoods on current land uses.
- Making the change modelling tools that are already used by government agencies available to the public, and specifically to land managers, would allow them to be deployed at a local level. A new tool could be created that allows a land manager to input details such as the size of their landholding and their soil type, then produce a tailored recommendation for the kinds of initiatives they could most productively pursue
- Large-scale land use change, and the benefits envisaged from it, cannot be delivered without the support and work of practitioners. As such, the government should properly recognise the work that is already being done and privately funded by rural interests, including in association with shooting and angling. Such practitioners must not be disparaged or ignored but recognised as key to delivery. The government cannot deliver its environmental targets without those who own and manage the land.

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