

Food & Farming

Calls for review of Red Tractor governance

The NFU Council has called for an independent review of the governance of the Red Tractor farm assurance scheme. The motion was passed following the launch of Red Tractor's Greener Farm Commitment (GFC), a voluntary module that will ask farmers to provide information on their carbon footprint. The NFU Council felt more granular, technical elements of the commitment should have been more widely consulted on. There are fears the information will be passed to retailers and used by them, leading to farmers being unable to offer carbon credits and other nature-based solutions on the wider market themselves. The GFC will be launched in April 2024.

Since the motion was passed, the NFU Council has unanimously agreed to the creation of two critical reviews into how farm assurance schemes operate in England and Wales. The first will focus on Red Tractor and the second more generally on farm-to-fork assurance covering matters such as whether producers get fair value. The Red Tractor review will look to:

- Establish Red Tractor's decision-making procedures and its transparency
- Examine who is consulted by Red Tractor in its development of standards, and when
- Look at the balance of this feedback and how Red Tractor engages with farmers
- Examine the effectiveness of these processes and identify the obstacles which need addressing
- Speak to those involved across the Red Tractor process in determining all these things.

Income from diversification increases

British farmers' income from diversification enterprises rose to 13% of turnover in 2023 according to new research by NFU Mutual. The research also reveals that 34% of farmers now run a diversified business, up 6% since 2018, and diversifications are more prevalent in England (41% of farmers) and Wales (38%) than in Scotland (27%). Renewable energy is the most popular diversification, with 6% of UK farmers operating schemes. Let property and holiday accommodation come in a close joint second at 5%, followed by equestrian businesses and camping in joint third at 4% of farmers.

Our latest Spotlight on [Rural Tourism and Leisure](#) investigated how to create a successful people-focused diversification enterprise. As Basic Payment Scheme support fades, farm and estate diversification builds business resilience. The resilience of a diversified business can be enhanced as well by expanding the offer with new events, experiences or attractions that tap into in-demand macro themes such as sustainability, wellbeing and in-person experiences.

Right to grow on unused land

Hull will become the first city in Britain to give people a "right to grow" on unused council land. Anyone from charities to groups of neighbours will be able to cultivate food on appropriate parcels of council land. Hull councillors unanimously passed the "right to grow" motion. Once it passes its scrutiny committee, the council will produce a map of suitable land and help prospective growers overcome practical obstacles such as insurance and access to water supplies.

Farmers receive Sustainable Farming Incentive payment

The first farmers to sign up for the 2023 Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) have received their first payment. The early payments equate to 25% of the annual value of the farmers' agreements. In its first month, the SFI offer for 2023 has had over 14,000 registrations of interest and almost 1,000 applications submitted. Most farmers can now apply direct online but farmers on common land still need to register their interest.

Millions gifted for crop yield research

The Michael Uren Foundation has donated £2.45 million for research into soil microbial communities. The research, to be carried out by Imperial College London, aims to establish how these microbial communities can sustainably improve crop yields. Recent studies have shown certain soil microbes can suppress crop diseases, either by competing for food with them or directly inhibiting their growth. Previous research has shown that altering the soil microbiome can have better outcomes in comparison with single-strain alterations, however, past

attempts to treat crops with individual strains of beneficial microbes have been ad hoc and limited in scope and scale. These researchers have proposed a strategy that they hope will allow farmers to reliably conduct microbial interventions at a scale suitable for agriculture and ecosystem restoration.

Policy

Renters Reform Bill update

The Renters Reform Bill has had its second reading in the House of Commons, a carry-over motion was also passed meaning the Bill's progress has been saved and it can move into its committee stage when the new parliamentary term starts after the King's speech.

Much of the debate focused on the implications of needing to reform the courts before abolishing the section 21 notice to quit. This was not a recent change to the plan - the abolition of section 21 has always been stated to be contingent upon improved court processes being introduced first. Then at least six months' notice would be given before it applies to new tenancies and at least a further 12 months before it applies to existing tenancies. However, this is now attracting increased political attention due to the uncertain timeline and perhaps pessimism over how quickly the court process could be improved. In the debate, opposition politicians described the government's position as "kicking the ban of section 21 into the long grass".

In his opening speech Michael Gove, The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities confirmed some changes to the Bill will be made in response to recommendations from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee. There will be improvements to ensure landlords can take action in response to antisocial behaviour and in recognition that their tenancies are cyclical, a specific possession ground will be introduced to allow student accommodation providers to recover possession.

Consultation on Scope 3 emissions reporting

The government is seeking views on whether Scope 3 greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reporting should be required. The International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) issued its inaugural standards for sustainability-related disclosures, including requirements for entities to report their Scope 1, Scope 2 and Scope 3 GHG. Scope 3 reporting has largely been voluntary until now but is receiving increased attention. The government is seeking views on the costs, benefits and practicalities of Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions reporting to help inform its decision on whether to endorse the ISSB standards in the UK. The [consultation](#) will remain open until 12 December.

Agrochemical licencing

A revised Chemicals strategy for the UK was a central pledge in the 25-Year Environment Plan, published in 2018. Regulatory powers at the UK level were expected in 2020, but delayed until this Autumn. Defra has now confirmed a delay until 2024. All pesticides with licences due to expire before December 2023 have already been given an automatic extension of three years.

Food price caps dismissed

The Scottish National Party's (SNP) proposal to cap the price of staple foods was dismissed as "communism" by UK Food and Farming Minister Mark Spencer. At the SNP party conference, SNP Westminster leader Stephen Flynn called on the UK to follow France's example and cap food prices in supermarkets for "basic daily essentials". The SNP put the proposal to the Government in a Defra question session, where Mr Spencer replied that the free market was doing a lot to suppress the cost of food inflation. SNP environment spokesperson Steven Bonnar said it is not farmers benefitting from price increases and that price caps would stop supermarkets profiteering.

Environment & Natural Capital

Judicial review granted over agricultural pollution

An environmental charity can pursue a legal challenge against the Environment Agency (EA) over its failure to protect the river Wye from agricultural pollution. River Action argued the EA has acted unlawfully by not enforcing the Farming Rules for Water to prevent the spreading of excessive levels of manure across agricultural land in the Wye River catchment. According to the charity, if these regulations had been enforced, increases in phosphorous concentrations in the soil could have been better managed.

The High Court has granted River Action permission to pursue a legal challenge. The court was told of a difference between the written law and guidance from the secretary of state. This difference meant the guidance

permitted fertiliser to be applied at times when it should have been prevented by law. The EA said the charity was actually objecting to Defra guidance and the EA was attempting to enforce the law. Charles Streeten, representing the EA, pointed to 140 incidents in England which led to enforcement and around 6,000 occasions where informal advice was given.

Wales: Natural Flood Management Accelerator Programme

The newly announced Natural Flood Accelerator Programme will fund 23 projects across eight different Risk Management Authorities. The two-year programme will promote nature-based flood management solutions across all major river catchments in Wales with £4.6 million of funding. It is expected to reduce flood risk for approximately 2,000 properties.

Super National Nature Reserve to be created

31 nature sites will be brought together, as well as 400 hectares of additional land, to form a super nature reserve. The Mendip 'super' National Nature Reserve will span Cheddar Gorge, the Mendip Hills and over 1,400 hectares of steep limestone slopes, traditional wildflower grasslands and ancient wooded combs. The site is the second in the new King's Series of National Nature Reserves which will see five major National Nature Reserves created each year for the next five years.

Property & Development

National Infrastructure Assessment recommends major expenditure

The National Infrastructure Commission has called for £30 billion to be invested in infrastructure every year until 2040. The recommendation was made as part of the second National Infrastructure Assessment (NIA), which also suggested:

- Offering £7,000 per home for the installation of heat pumps
- Creating a new strategic energy reserve
- Introducing compulsory water metering beyond water-stressed areas
- Signalling that energy from waste is not a viable option unless carbon emissions are captured.

The government's National Infrastructure Strategy was a formal response to the first Assessment and broadly aligned with the Commission's recommendations. This second NIA has made several suggestions which contradict recent government decisions so such agreement is unlikely to be seen again. For more information on the second NIA and its key recommendations see our [blog](#).

Farmer paid to stop pig farming

A Norfolk farmer is to be paid public money to stop using their land to raise pigs. By essentially closing the pig farm down and reducing the volume of nutrients being released into waterways, it is hoped that 5,000 new homes could be built in the county. The deal is believed to be the first of its kind in the UK and, though exact figures are not known, a recent Swardston parish council meeting heard the scheme could cost £1 - £1.5 million. The deal will be enforced by covenants which would prevent pig farming on the land but allow arable crops, grass or wildflowers. The compensation will be paid by Norfolk Environmental Credits Ltd, a joint venture between Norfolk councils and Anglian Water. If you would like to discuss private nutrient mitigation schemes please contact [Julia Pound](#).

Solar farm rejected due to economic harm to tenant

A solar farm and battery storage system on tenanted farmland has been refused planning consent. The whole scheme involved 52 hectares of arable land in North Yorkshire. As well as the visual impact of the development and considering the proportion of best and most versatile agricultural land, the economic harm to the tenant was a key factor in the refusal. Tenant farmer Robert Sturdy told the North Yorkshire Strategic Planning Committee meeting that if the scheme was approved, his landlord would be able to evict him from 45 hectares of the 113-hectare Agricultural Holdings Act tenancy that he had farmed for 35 years. Harmony Energy said the plant would be in use for 40 years, supplying clean energy to some 38% of homes in the Ryedale district. Moreover, the firm had already secured a viable grid connection with Northern Powergrid. Other claimed benefits included a 105% biodiversity net gain and 12,500 tonnes of annual carbon dioxide savings. Councillors said that while the plan was good, not enough had been done to identify alternative sites.

Business & Economy

Carbon credits linked to businesses decarbonising faster

New research shows that companies purchasing voluntary carbon credits are more likely to be addressing climate change in their direct operations and throughout their value chains than those who do not. The findings are significant following recent criticism of the integrity of avoided deforestation carbon markets and accusations of 'greenhushing' (under reporting green credentials to avoid scrutiny) against major corporations involved in buying carbon offsets. The report, from Forest Trends, analysed corporate disclosures by 7,415 organisations during 2021. The evidence showed that companies buying voluntary carbon credits outperform their peers in accelerated climate action and spent three times more on emissions reduction activities than the typical non-buyer. Voluntary carbon buyers also are more likely to have science-based targets to address climate change. The report concludes that the perception that carbon credits are being used to delay or avoid meaningful action on climate is largely unfounded.

Other Rural News

Ban on lead shot recommended

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has recommended a ban on the sale and use of lead shot. The recommendation was originally due in January but was delayed after the HSE received nearly 3,000 consultation responses. It has **concluded** that both environmental and health risks are not adequately controlled. The ban on the sale and use of lead shot would affect both outside use and live quarry shooting, with a derogation for athletes involved in target shooting, as identified by the appropriate sporting body. It recommended a transition period of five years. The regulatory body also recommended a restriction on the use of lead bullets for outdoor target shooting with a derogation for use at ranges with appropriate risk management in place.

And finally... Tractors to the rescue

Storm Babet caused havoc across the UK. In Debenham, Suffolk, students at Sir Robert Hitcham Primary School and Debenham High School were preparing to spend the night at their schools, being surrounded by flood waters up to three feet deep in some places. Luckily for them, farmers braved the waters in their tractors to rescue the children and ferry them back home. Elsewhere, farmers in Suffolk have spent days helping beleaguered residents and stranded motorists as well as their own livestock. The farmers' heroics have not gone unnoticed, with councillors and industry leaders heaping praise on their selfless acts.

If you have queries regarding any of the articles, please get in touch with us.

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