

Food & Farming

Dairy farms take part in pioneering soil carbon project

First Milk has committed to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2040 at the latest, and will work with the farmers in its supply chain to sequester 100,000 tonnes of carbon per annum in their soils by 2025. The farmer owned cooperative is supporting 40 of its member's dairy farms across the UK to carry out intensive soil carbon analysis at reduced costs. The intention is to extend this field by field carbon stock quantification to 100 farms by the end of 2021. Unlike conventional soil carbon stock analysis, this project will use technology developed by Agricarbon, which extracts soil samples using a hydraulic probe that takes a 4cm core to a depth of one metre. The initial phase will be undertaken in partnership with Nestlé, and it is hoped that the in depth data collection will inform the development of regenerative agriculture plans for farms to capture additional soil carbon, whilst maintaining and enhancing productivity.

Free Covid-19 tests for seasonal agricultural workers

The government is offering to supply free Lateral Flow Device tests to employers of seasonal agricultural workers. Making the tests available will help reduce the risk of Covid-19 spreading among seasonal workers and mitigate food supply chain disruptions from labour shortages. The tests can be carried out at a designated workplace site, or for businesses of over 10 people they can be taken at home. If a test is positive staff must isolate and undertake a confirmatory Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test. Employers must [register](#) by 12 April 2021 to receive a supply of free test kits until the end of June.

Birds Eye teams up with WWF

Birds Eye owner Nomad Foods has partnered with WWF to create agricultural solutions to improve productivity whilst also helping tackle the climate and biodiversity crises. The partnership will focus on projects relevant to Nomad's vegetable production. The focus of the work will be on pursuing 'nature-positive' approaches to farming that also increase food productivity. Within the project there are plans to measure and mitigate the farm-level impact on biodiversity levels, and explore practices that boost pollinating insects. Nomad has committed to sourcing 100% of its vegetables and potatoes through sustainable farming practices by 2025. At present over a third of the pea farmers in its UK supply chain have biodiversity plans in place. Its partnership and plans will be communicated to consumers via on-pack messaging from June 2021. WWF views the partnership as both a way to reduce the environmental impact of farming and encourage plant rich diets.

Growers do not support the statutory potato levy

Potato growers have voted to end the statutory AHDB levy in their sector. Of the 1,196 votes cast, 66% were in favour of ending the levy. Even when measured in terms of "amount of levy paid", there was a similar 63% to 37% split, and it emerged that potato buyers were even more against the levy than growers. The result is a clear indication that the majority of potato growers in England and Wales do not believe that the levy is delivering value for their businesses. The outcome of the ballot is close to the recent result of a similar exercise in the horticulture sector, where 61% of growers were opposed to its levy. Whilst calling for the government to respect the result, the NFU points out that elements of the work carried out by AHDB Potatoes remains crucial for businesses. The government has said that a joint decision on the future of the potato levy will be made after the Scottish and Welsh government elections. In the meantime AHDB will continue to collect levy payments from the industry for the 2021/22 year.

EU sets ambitious organic target

The European Commission has set a target to have 25% of agricultural land within the EU under organic farming systems by 2030 in order to improve biodiversity. Currently, approximately 8.5% of the bloc is farmed organically, and the proportion varies significantly between member states. For context 2.7% of UK agricultural land is certified as organic. The Commission intends to use the Common Agricultural Policy as the key tool for supporting the conversion, with an action plan that is focused on boosting organic consumption and production. The Commission is planning an annual 'Organic Day' and organic supply chain awards to increase awareness of organic production. In the UK Defra has said it wants the design of Environmental Land Management to reflect the full diversity of environmentally-sustainable techniques such as organic production but there is no indication whether future policy or payment rates will promote organic conversion or if Defra intends to leave it to market forces.

Policy

A sustainable future for Scotland's food and farming

Scotland's Rural Economy Secretary Fergus Ewing has published a series of reports from sector-led climate groups. Mr Ewing set up the groups last year to draw up proposals for how the agricultural sector within Scotland can reduce carbon emissions, and what support the government might provide to enable this. The climate groups focus on the arable, dairy, upland and crofting, pig and suckler beef industries. The government will now consider the proposals within the reports, which will feed into Scotland's new rural support scheme. England's agricultural policy has previously been criticised for omitting support for domestic food production; conversely these reports are indications that Scottish agricultural policy will retain a central focus on food. Mr Ewing has made it clear that he wants to continue to support food production, but ensure that it is symbiotic with Scotland's 2045 net zero emissions target.

Scottish government responds to Deer Working Group recommendations

The Scottish government has [responded](#) to the report from the independent Deer Working Group (established in 2017) on the management of wild deer in Scotland. The initial report issued 99 recommendations relating to the current system of deer management. The government welcomed the report, but also acknowledged the recent progress in deer management in terms of higher culls rates, increased habitat impact assessment, partnerships and the use of incentive schemes to meet climate change and biodiversity priorities through deer management groups. Following this independent review, the government has outlined new policy proposals such as phasing out the use of lead ammunition to cull deer, modernising existing deer legislation, the development of robust deer management plans and increased monitoring of deer numbers. Before any proposals are introduced into parliament, the government will conduct a public consultation.

Farming Investment Fund explained

The Farming Investment Fund is to be launched this autumn, and Defra has revealed more about its plans. The fund will be split into two, with grants of lower value offered by the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund and grants of higher value coming from the Farming Transformation Fund. The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund will provide grants to buy items from a set list, based on the current Countryside Productivity Small Grant Scheme. The list is currently being refreshed through industry consultation, and the ambition is for the application process to be fast, simple and online. The Farming Transformation Fund will support larger and more complicated investments, and is likely to be structured around supporting certain themes such as water resource management and improving farm productivity. For example it may support farm water storage infrastructure, precision agriculture equipment, robotic technology and processing equipment. The funds are open to farmers, agricultural or forestry contractors in England.

Opportunity to shape the new Landscape Recovery Scheme

Defra has reminded farmers and landowners that the opportunity to be involved in tests and trials for the Landscape Recovery Scheme component of Environmental Land Management closes on 30 April 2021. Landscape recovery will support the restoration and enhancement of ecosystems through large scale, long term land use change projects. The call for new proposals is to test the mechanisms required to deliver long term land use changes and understand how they can be rolled out more widely.

Environment & Natural Capital

New version of the Woodland Carbon Code launched

Version 2.1 of the Woodland Carbon Code has been launched and includes new documents for registration, validation and verification of woodland carbon projects. A key change to the code is that after 30 June 2021, all projects have to be registered before planting starts; previously applicants could retrospectively register woodland creation projects with the code. Land managers who planted this winter must submit their project by 30 June 2021. Anyone who has started preparing documents for the code has until 30 June 2021 to submit the project using the current version of documents. After that, all projects must be submitted on the new version 2.1 documents and use version 2.4 of the carbon calculator. If you would like to discuss a Woodland Carbon Code project please contact [Mike Chapman](#).

Refreshed Countryside Code

Natural England and Natural Resources Wales have launched a refreshed version of the [Countryside Code](#), to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the creation of the founding booklet. Covid-19 restrictions have increased demand for public access to green and natural spaces leading to some localised issues. Natural England has found that the pandemic has changed people's relationship with nature - 85% of people surveyed said that being in nature

makes them happy. However access to the countryside is not equal, and Natural England is using the launch of the new code to tackle inequalities and promote more inclusive access to the countryside for minority communities. The refreshed code has been introduced as lockdown measures are easing and an increase in visitors to the countryside is expected. Key changes to the code include advice to be friendly and say hello, reminders not to feed livestock, to remain on marked footpaths, how to manage dogs, and information regarding permissions for activities such as wild swimming. The new code is seen more as a guide than a list of rules, intended to encourage people to enjoy the countryside whilst respecting nature and rural businesses. There is accompanying advice for [land managers](#).

Scotland: Peatland restoration funding available

The next round of peatland restoration funding from the Scottish government's ten year £250 million package has been released. Land managers can now apply to the [Peatland ACTION Fund](#) for a share of £22 million. The fund has been expanded to include large scale schemes over multiple years, as well as smaller projects. In Scotland, 1.7 million hectares are peat soils, which is almost a quarter of the country. These soils store 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon, thought to be equivalent to 140 years of Scotland's emissions. However, 80% of Scotland's peatlands are in poor or degraded condition, meaning they release more carbon than they store. This funding is part of Scotland's drive to reach net zero emissions by 2045. Applications for funding should be made through NatureScot before 30 September 2021. If you would like to discuss a Peatland ACTION Fund application please contact [Charlie Davis](#).

Property & Development

Crack down on second home business rates relief use

In England, 60,000 properties classed as holiday lets are liable for business rates rather than council tax. In 96% of cases, their low rateable value means that owners benefit from small business rates relief and pay nothing at all. The government is concerned that some of these properties are second homes and are classed as holiday lets in order to avoid paying council tax. It is going to tighten the rules to ensure that only those who can prove they made a realistic effort to rent out their property for at least 140 days a year benefit from the relief. In addition, Treasury officials say that some of these owners may have claimed coronavirus support grants of up to £9,000 each to replace lost income.

New funding available for green homes

The government has announced an additional £300 million for green home upgrades, specifically for energy efficiency and low carbon heating schemes. This is following the failure of the £1.5 billion Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme which was launched last year but has since been closed, just over six months after it started. The scheme was criticised for its red tape and for being difficult to access; there were more than 96,000 applications for the grant, and 39,000 vouchers issued but reports suggest only 5,800 energy efficiency measures have been installed to date. Now the government has announced £300 million of new funding to be delivered through local authorities in England. This brings the total funding available for energy efficiency and low carbon heating in 2021/22 to over £1.3 billion.

Business & Economy

Whisky industry goes green

Almost £9 million is being made available to help distilleries decarbonise their production processes. 12 distilleries across Scotland and five in England have been invited to bid for grants of up to £3 million. Whisky production processes rely on fossil fuels which cause pollution equivalent to the annual carbon dioxide emissions of Norwich. This new funding will enable distilleries to cut carbon emissions by half a million tonnes every year. In the first phase of funding, distilleries received up to £75,000, to fund decarbonisation research and development, with schemes including the use of hydrogen and geothermal energy.

Covid-19 support: Business rates relief fund boosted

The government has announced an additional targeted business rates relief fund of £1.5 billion. The fund has been set up for businesses outside of the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors that have been impacted by Covid-19. Businesses have been appealing for discounts on their rates bills, arguing that the pandemic represents a material change of circumstance (MCC). However, the government has made clear that market-wide changes to property values can only be properly considered at general rates revaluations, and will therefore legislate to rule out Covid-19 related MCC appeals. Therefore, the government has instead announced this £1.5 billion of funding to distribute across sectors that have been most impacted economically, rather than on the basis of falls in property values. This funding is available for businesses in England, and local authorities will use official data on the economic impact of Covid-19, along with their knowledge of local businesses and the local economy to make awards.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Covid-19 induced innovation in the food and drink sector

For many, the pandemic has created a reason to reassess lifestyle choices around consumption, particularly as people have been cooking and eating more in their home, becoming increasingly aware of what and how they eat. New trends and demands have been picked up by start-ups within the food and drink sector, generating impressive levels of innovation and entrepreneurialism. Examples include Oops Food Clearance, a frozen discounter which sells food that would otherwise go to landfill due to overproduction or errors. The store opened in November, in response to the surplus created when foodservice grappled with lockdown closures. FiveDinners is an anti-food waste meal planning service launched in September to help with family friendly meal inspiration. As well as waste reduction, wellness is an enduring culinary trend with Emmunity launching last month - a soft drink that supports the immune system and Nourished Minds Cookery debuted at Christmas, which runs virtual cookery classes, promoting cooking for mental health.

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