

Food & Farming

Views sought on hedgerow protections

Is there still a need for two metre buffer strips next to hedgerows? Should the dates for hedge trimming be changed? What defines an 'important' hedge? Defra is asking all these questions in a new [consultation](#) on existing hedgerow protection laws in England. Hedgerows are iconic features of the British countryside and provide a wealth of benefits such as habitat provision and protection from soil erosion. As the UK separates itself from EU legislation, there is an opportunity to amend the protections afforded to hedgerows to comply with UK targets around net zero.

The government has set a target of creating or restoring 30,000 miles of hedgerows by 2037 and 45,000 miles of hedgerows by 2050, returning hedgerow lengths in England to 10% above the 1984 peak (360,000 miles). It is an ambitious target, however there are nearly 50,000 miles of hedgerows managed under Countryside or Environmental Stewardship options and over 8,000 miles of hedgerow creation or restoration within Countryside Stewardship capital grants. The consultation is open to anyone with an interest in hedgerows, including farmers, landowners, wildlife groups and members of the public. It will close on 20 September 2023.

Farming in the sweet spot

A new report has found that nature-friendly farming can increase commercial farming returns by 10 to 45%. Produced by the Wildlife Trust, Nature Friendly Farming Network and Nethergill Associates, the '[Farming in the sweet spot](#)' report looked at 165 farm business accounts to understand how profitability can increase when reducing inputs. The report suggests the more traditional high-input and high-output operation has been less profitable over the last few years due to the Brexit, Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine increasing the prices of inputs.

The "sweet spot" also known as the "Maximum Sustainable Output" or MSO, is where commercial returns are maximised and is established by analysing revenue, variable and fixed costs, and is calculated prior to considering subsidies. By farming at this MSO, analysis showed commercial returns increased by 45.3% for lowland livestock, 39.1% for upland livestock, 32.7% for dairy systems and 9.5% for lowland arable farms. The report also found that nature-friendly farming can help to improve soil health, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide more habitat for wildlife. Authors suggested nature-friendly farming is a win-win for farmers and the environment. It is a more profitable way to farm, and it can help to address the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Total income from farming

Total income from farming (TIFF) has increased by £1.1 billion (16.6%) between 2021 and 2022. The latest TIFF report states this substantial increase was driven by price increases across most commodities in this account, which more than offset increases in input prices. Total livestock output in 2022 increased by £2.7 billion (16.2%), driven by a 39.6% increase in the value of milk. Total crop output increased by £2.4 billion (21.9%), driven by a 50.1% increase in the value of wheat as well as a 10.3% increase in average yield boosted by favourable planting conditions in the autumn of 2021. Intermediate consumption increased by £3.6 billion (19.2%), something predominantly attributable to a 23.7% increase in the value of compound animal feed and a 77.9% increase in the value of fertiliser.

Policy

Retained EU Law Bill

The Retained EU Law (REUL) Bill has successfully completed its final UK parliamentary stage and is expected to be granted Royal Assent in the coming days where it will become the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act. The legislation will amend the 2018 European Union (Withdrawal) Act, which sought to incorporate former EU laws into the UK legal system after Brexit as 'retained EU law'. In May, the total number of retained EU laws identified across government rose to over 4,829, an increase of over 1,000 since January though it is still unclear just how much retained EU law exists.

The REUL Bill began controversially with a clause stating all retained EU law would expire in December 2023 unless a minister expressly decided to keep it. This intention has now been dropped, however around 600 laws will still be

removed and ministers will be handed sweeping powers to remove EU-derived laws, an option lasting until the end of 2026. There has been widespread concern over the level of parliamentary scrutiny required over laws to be repealed or revoked, particularly those related to environmental standards. A proposed amendment to include an environmental non-regression clause in the bill was put before the House of Commons three times but was not included.

Sunak uninterested in the environment

Lord Goldsmith has announced his resignation from the role of international environment minister with a fierce attack on the government. He claims the UK has visibly stepped off the world stage and withdrawn its leadership on climate and nature. He continued to say the Prime Minister is simply uninterested in the environment, a signal that has trickled down through Whitehall and caused a form of paralysis on the issue. Goldsmith's comments came shortly after the Commons' privileges committee named him as one of three peers who took part in what it called a "coordinated campaign" to undermine its inquiry into Boris Johnson.

Wales Agriculture Bill

Senedd Members have voted in favour of the first made-in-Wales Agriculture Bill. The Bill provides Welsh Ministers with the powers necessary to provide support to farmers, such as through the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme. The Bill will also see the use of snares and glue traps banned, making Wales the first UK nation to introduce a complete ban. It also sees the Forestry Act 1967 amended to afford the environmental and wildlife better protection during felling operations. The Bill now moves on to seek Royal Assent.

Wales: Delay to environmental governance body

The Welsh government has pushed back the creation of a new environmental watchdog again. The Office for Environmental Protection covers England and Northern Ireland, and Environmental Standards Scotland operates in Scotland, but Wales is the only UK nation with no similar watchdog after the UK's exit from the EU. Proposals for such a body were first published in March 2020 and an "interim environmental protection assessor" was appointed in March 2021.

Environment & Natural Capital

UK missing most climate targets

The Climate Change Committee (CCC) says the country is at serious risk of missing many of its climate goals and has lost its status as a global climate leader. In its annual [progress report](#) to parliament, the CCC said it had markedly less confidence than it did last year that the UK's climate targets from 2030 onwards would be met, blaming weak leadership. It added that the government was demonstrating overreliance on certain technologies which have yet to be scaled up, such as carbon capture. The report did outline some glimmers of hope, such as in growing sales of new electric cars and the continued deployment of renewable capacity. However, it warned that emissions from agriculture and land use are essentially unchanged over the past decade. The CCC also criticised the fall in the number of homes receiving energy efficiency improvements under the government's Energy Company Obligation scheme. The number has more than halved, from 383,700 in 2021 to 159,600 in 2022; between one and two million homes should be upgraded each year to meet net zero. What is more, houses are still being built that will require retrofitting with low-carbon heating and efficiency measures, because the future homes standard is still yet to be implemented.

New Site of Special Scientific Interest

The Natural England (NE) board has voted to designate 3,044 hectares of land in Penwith Moors, Cornwall as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), stating that the land is an important habitat for rare birds, plants, and insects. NE says designating the moors as an SSSI will help tackle the climate emergency and ensure that it remains a cherished landscape for Cornwall. This new SSSI would also contribute to the government's targets and commitments to halt biodiversity decline by 2030.

The decision has been unpopular in the farming community due to the extra restrictions farmers would face. It has been argued this would risk fundamentally changing the character of a landscape which has a long history of agriculture and livestock grazing. Farmers also face uncertainty as they have not been provided with stocking rates or information on how this will affect their day-to-day farming. NE claims they will support and reward the nature-friendly farming that is essential to sustain West Penwith Moors and Downs and want to work with the farmers to support them in the management and farming of the land under the new SSSI class.

Species Survival Fund launched

The UK government has launched a £25 million [fund](#) to support the creation and restoration of wildlife-rich habitats in England. Projects must deliver against the fund theme of habitat creation and restoration, which can include targeted actions taken as part of wider habitat creation or restoration projects. Grants of £250,000 to £3 million are on offer for projects over a maximum of two years' duration. Applicants are encouraged to contribute at least 5% of project costs in cash via partnership funding. Priority will be given to projects that can provide partnership funding from non-government sources such as private investment, as this will be perceived as adding value for money. Interest must be expressed by noon on 24 July 2023, with a full application being submitted by 26 October 2023.

Funding for pond creation

100% funding is available for creating wildlife friendly ponds for Great Crested Newts. Wildscapes CIC and Natural England are seeking to work with landowners as part of a district level licensing scheme to compensate for the environmental impacts of development. The funding also covers maintenance costs for a 25-year period. Where multiple ponds are being created/restored, landowners could be paid up to £600 per pond, though incentive payments could be reduced if extensive livestock fencing is required. Natural England used their understanding of Great Crested Newts and their habitat requirements to produce maps showing the [most suitable areas](#) to create and restore ponds.

Wales: Forestry Schemes and Grants

Wales wants to establish a nationwide network of publicly accessible woodlands and forests known as 'The National Forest for Wales'. To support that ambition, a new scheme has been launched to include woodlands not owned by the Welsh government as part of the National Forest. Any landowner or manager will be able to apply to the National Forest for Wales Status Scheme and any type of well-managed woodland will be eligible, from the newly created to the ancient. The aim of the National Forest is to tackle climate change as well as bringing social, economic, and environmental benefits to Wales.

This scheme will work alongside the existing The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) and Coetiroedd Bach (Tiny Forests) grants. TWIG will provide financial support for people to create new woodlands and enhance and expand existing woodlands in accordance with the UKFS. Coetiroedd Bach grant will create 100 'Tiny Forests' between April 2023 and the end of March 2025. Applications opened in April 2023 following the successful delivery of the pilot scheme in 2020. This scheme will provide financial support for people to create small forests from woodlands that are well-managed, accessible and give local communities the opportunity to get involved in woodlands and nature.

Another option available for landowners is The Woodland Creation Grants which support woodland creation by farmers and land managers. Two grants are available:

- Small Grants: Woodland Creation Scheme: for support to plant areas up to 2 hectares
- Woodland Creation Grants: for support to plant larger areas of woodland

The funding will help farmers get ready for the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme. Trees planted now will count towards the universal action for tree cover on farms.

The next window to apply for woodland creation funding opens on 24th July and closes on 15th September, this will be the last chance to apply for planting this winter. This is later than previously advised due to an increase in payment rates to reflect the actual costs of creating woodland.

Property & Development

Objections to 5,000 homes

The Environment Agency has made a series of objections to planning applications for nearly 5,000 homes in Cambridgeshire. The Agency is concerned water demand from the developments may increase abstraction and risk deterioration to water bodies because of the additional demand for water. The agency has made the objections to five planning applications, including plans for 3,500 homes at Bourn Airfield, 425 homes proposed for land north of Cambridge North Station and up to 1,000 homes proposed for second and third phases of the Darwin Green development. The Agency stated the proposed development is contrary to policy in the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan where proposals must demonstrate there is adequate water supply to serve the whole development without harming groundwater or other water bodies. It is allegedly the first time the agency had objected to new housing over water concerns.

Business & Economy

Review of supply chain labour shortage

An [independent review](#) into labour shortages in the food supply chain has made several recommendations:

- Implement a comprehensive strategy to enhance sector attractiveness
- Reform access to migrant labour, particularly in the short term
- Invest in domestic workers and reform the Apprenticeship Levy
- Produce a workforce data strategy
- Support food career curriculum delivery and build on skills supply collaboration
- Advance automation knowledge and incentivise investment in automation

The review has been met with cautious optimism by the industry. NFU Deputy President Tom Bradshaw said he was pleased to see the independent panel recognises that action is needed after a survey revealed that over 77% of respondents said difficulty in recruiting workers was down to a lack of applicants. The Association of Independent Meat Suppliers echoed the comments but pointed out that another call for evidence on the Seasonal Worker Visa Inquiry has been launched, too late to impact on the need for seasonal workers in 2023.

Lithium mine joint venture in Cornwall

British Lithium and French mining group Imerys aim to generate 20,000 tonnes of lithium carbonate a year from Cornish granite deposits through a new mine in Cornwall. The project is expected to cost £575 million, with Imerys emerging with an 80% stake. Production is expected to be at full speed as soon as 2028 and British Lithium said the resource would be capable of supplying one-third of the country's lithium demand by 2030. British Lithium has carried out drilling and exploration on Imerys-owned land in Cornwall since 2017 and developed a pilot plant to produce battery-grade lithium carbonate. The joint venture has been approved under the National Security Investment Act protocol and will make Imerys the largest integrated lithium producer in Europe.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Slithery stowaway shocks shopper

Few shoppers in the UK usually bring a snake home from their weekly shop, but that is exactly what happened to Neville Linton, 63, of the West Midlands. After purchasing a stem of broccoli from Aldi in Stourbridge, Mr Linton was surprised to find a ladder snake nestled in amongst the vegetable. Not being a fan of snakes, he asked his sister to help. The pair first took the snake back to the Aldi store and then on to a zoo where an expert identified the species. Ladder snakes are mostly found around Spain and Portugal and are not venomous but have been known to nip humans.

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