

Food & Farming

Farmers left with less than 1% of the profit from food production

New research by Sustain has revealed unsustainably low returns at farm level. The report, *Unpicking Food Prices*, looked at five everyday food stuffs – apples, cheese, beefburgers, carrots and bread – and found that after intermediaries and retailers take their cut, farmers are sometimes left with far less than 1% of the profit, typically just 0.03% of the retail price. By comparison, processors were found to be receiving 10 times the profit for some of the products. Vicki Hird, Sustain's head of sustainable farming, says the results show farms face a problematic supply chain in terms of costs, complexity and extracting value. The production risks that farmers shoulder, combined with a lack of bargaining power within the supply chain results in very low and tight margins. Ms Hird explained that the lack of financial stability limits a farm businesses' capacity to invest in resilient, climate adaptive systems and makes it hard for farmers and growers to achieve the government's environmental targets.

Majority of farmers support hedgerows as wildlife corridors

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) commissioned Farmers Weekly to carry out a survey of farmers' attitudes to hedgerows. The survey gained a total of 1,160 respondents and showed 86% of farmers believe hedgerows are important to them and their business, with wildlife habitat being the top benefit of having hedgerows. 59% of respondents have planted hedgerows in the last ten years and said they are likely to plant more in the next five years. However, 94% of respondents agree there are significant barriers to planting more hedgerows, with cost being the primary barrier, followed by lack of time and resources and government support. 24% said that potential losses of land/production was a barrier to hedgerow creation. Nearly half of all respondents have funded their own hedgerow planting, however most farmers have used some form of government funding to support hedgerow creation. The survey also found hedgerows are very important to livestock farmers, with arable farmers less likely to place as much value on hedgerows. The CPRE believes that the hedgerow network is the UK's largest nature reserve and is now calling on the government to commit to a target of 40% more hedgerows by 2050.

Policy

Onshore wind farm rules to be consulted on after Conservative backbenchers revolt

The government has pledged to relax restrictions on building onshore wind farms in England after a threatened rebellion from Conservative backbenchers. Rishi Sunak has announced a consultation on relaxing rules that effectively ban new onshore wind turbines in England, as a response to the mounting pressure from within his own party. The proposed rule of requiring new turbines to be built on pre-designated land will be rewritten, however new wind farms would still be subject to local approval. The way in which local approval will be measured will be part of the consultation due to conclude by April 2023. Simon Clark MP led the rebellion on wind farms and his amendment was backed by 34 Conservative MPs, including former prime ministers Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Environment Secretary announces plans for new multi-million pound fund for nature

In a speech to mark the start of the UN nature conference, COP15, Environment Secretary Therese Coffey announced plans to launch a new multi-million pound fund to create and restore wildlife-rich habitats in spring 2023. The fund will secure multiple benefits for nature, climate and people, and encourage opportunities for private funding by backing underfunded nature-based solutions. Dr Coffey also reaffirmed the government's commitment to double UK international climate finance to £11.6 billion and to spend at least £3 billion on nature, specifically through the £500 million Blue Planet Fund and £100 million Biodiverse Landscapes Fund. However, Dr Coffey's department has received criticism for failing to meet the statutory deadline (set through the Environment Act) of 31st October 2022 to confirm new long-term targets for air quality, water, biodiversity and species abundance, resource efficiency and waste reduction. Craig Bennett, chief executive of The Wildlife Trusts, said 'the UK government has a record of making big environmental announcements to get headlines, but then failing to keep promises. When it does follow-through the policies are so dramatically watered-down that they bear little resemblance to the ambition of the original promise'. The Wildlife Trusts is concerned the UK is not demonstrating the global leadership and commitment it should to nature recovery. Dr Coffey recently attributed Defra's delayed policies and targets to 'a search for perfection' and told MPs it would now focus on what is going to make a real difference to the environment.

Environment & Natural Capital

UK seaweed packaging company wins an Earthshot prize

A UK start-up, Notpla, which uses seaweed to make alternatives to plastic packaging, has been named as one of the £1 million winners of Prince William's Earthshot climate prize. The Earthshot Prize awards grants to innovative solutions to the environmental crises, which have the potential to be scaled up. Hackney-based Notpla first developed an edible bubble called an Ooho that could hold water, and then a plastic alternative eponymously called Notpla which is made from seaweed. Its uses include a coating for takeaway boxes, film, paper made from seaweed pulp and as an alternative for rigid plastic. This year Notpla has made more than one million takeaway food boxes for takeaway delivery platform JustEat.

UK trees planted outside woodlands are worth over £3.8 billion per year

For the first time, the economic value of individual trees outside of forests and woodland in the UK has been calculated, at £3.8 billion per year. The figures were revealed in a study published by Forest Research and Defra as part of National Tree Week. Almost a quarter of trees in Great Britain are outside of woodlands – from single trees lining streets or in parkland, to spreading hedgerow trees. The valuation is based on the services these trees provide in sequestering and storing carbon, regulating temperatures, strengthening flood resilience and reducing noise and air pollution as well as providing important habitats. By quantifying their total environmental and social value, the hope is the report will help to incentivise councils, land managers and local communities to plant more trees outside of woodlands. The report estimates the 100 year natural capital value of non-woodland trees to be between £68.5 to £151.1 billion, in 2020 prices.

Property & Development

Substantial changes to housing law in Wales now in place

As of 1st December 2022, the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 changed the way in which all landlords in Wales rent their properties. Under the new law, tenants and licensees are now known as 'contract-holders' and tenancy agreements have been replaced with 'occupation contracts'. There are now just two types of contracts – 'secure' contracts for the social rented sector and 'standard' contracts for the private rented sector.

The no fault notice period for tenants has increased from two to six months, which comes into play for existing tenants from Thursday 1st June 2023. It will no longer be possible to issue a notice to quit in the first six months, meaning all contract holders will have a minimum 12 months of security at the start of their tenancy. There are new succession rights in place and more flexible arrangements for joint contract-holders, which makes it easier to add or remove others to an occupation contract. There is also now a strengthened duty on landlords to ensure the property they rent is fit for human habitation including the installation of smoke and carbon monoxide alarms and regular electric testing. The practice of 'retaliatory eviction' has been addressed, whereby a landlord serves notice on a tenant because they ask for repairs or complain about poor conditions. Abandoned properties can also now be repossessed by a landlord without needing a court order.

Business & Economy

Project Gigabit rolls out in Cumbria

Project Gigabit is the government's £5 billion programme to rollout gigabit capable broadband to hard-to-reach areas throughout the UK. 60,000 premises in rural Cumbria will be connected to the fastest broadband on the market after Belfast-based Fibrus signed the largest contract yet under the Project Gigabit programme. Installation is underway in the region, with the first connections expected by the spring. Fibrus has committed to creating at least 90 apprenticeships in Cumbria following the government investment. These will cover a range of roles from underground and overhead cabling to surveying, and Fibrus has also committed to establishing an apprentice training academy at Newton Rigg near Penrith. This project will provide broadband to some of the most hard-to-reach places in the Lake District, including the mountain rescue base at Wasdale Head.

The government has also announced it will triple the value of domestic vouchers available under the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme. From early next year, eligible homes and businesses will both be able to apply for up to £4,500 to cover the costs of a gigabit-capable connection; enabling broadband providers to reach further into rural areas where the build costs are higher.

Other Rural News

Welsh Leek secures national protection

Wales' national vegetable and emblem, the Welsh Leek, has become the third Welsh product to achieve UK level Protected Geographical Indication status since Brexit, joining Gower Salt Marsh Lamb and Cambrian Mountains Lamb. It is the 19th product to gain Welsh Geographical Indication status, joining the likes of Anglesey Sea Salt, Welsh Lamb and Pembrokeshire Earlies. The UK GI scheme was established at the start of 2021, following Brexit, and ensures certain food and drink products can continue to receive legal protection against imitation and misuse. Welsh Leeks can now be sold with a UK GI logo, promoting Welsh heritage and culture and proving the product and consumers with certification of quality and uniqueness.

And finally...**The National Trust harnesses the power of hydro**

The National Trust has passed a milestone target of generating 50% of its energy from renewables following the installation of a hydroelectric power turbine in Watendlath, a hamlet in the fells of Borrowdale. The fells and high rainfall in the Lake District make it an ideal site for hydropower generators, which use fast flowing water to power a turbine. The Trust revamped a pre-existing hydropower system which was installed 60 years ago but had fallen out of use. The revamped system provides energy to power 84 average family homes each year. It is the 11th Lake District hydroelectric scheme that the Trust has installed in the past eight years as part of its Get Off Oil campaign to be carbon neutral by 2030. The 11 hydro units feed directly into the National Grid and will produce 5,788,000 kilowatt hours of power each year, sufficient to power almost 2,000 homes.

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