

Food & Farming

Sustainable Farming Incentive 2022 payment rates announced

The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) is a component of Environmental Land Management (ELM) and will launch in England in 2022, and expand its offering until 2025. Defra has designed it to incentivise and reward farmers for providing public goods such as improved water quality, enhanced biodiversity and climate change mitigation, alongside food production. Farmers will be paid for performing land management actions to meet SFI standards, and can select between three levels of ambition (introductory, intermediate and advanced). In 2022 it will initially focus on arable, grassland and moorland soils and offer payment rates between £22 and £58 per hectare. Three years security of tenure is required to enter land into SFI (reduced to two years in 2022 only).

Using the latest information farmers are now able to evaluate how compatible the SFI standards available in 2022 are with their existing crop and livestock production systems. They can consider practically and financially how viable the changes needed to achieve a given level of ambition or stretch to the next level may be for their business. For more information on the SFI see our briefing note, or contact [Georgina Sweeting](#) to discuss how it could be implemented on your farm.

Supermarket switches to insect-based feed

Insect farms will be installed on 10 free-range egg farms that supply Morrisons supermarket. To reduce the use of imported soy feed, larvae from the Better Origin insect farms will be fed to the hens alongside a diet of British beans, peas and sunflower seeds. This new diet is part of Morrisons' plans to become the first supermarket to launch own brand carbon neutral eggs in 2022. Each week the project will use 30 tonnes of fruit and vegetable waste from the retailer's Yorkshire processing site as a rearing substrate for the larvae.

The Better Origin X1 mini-farm is completely autonomous, making use of camera technology in combination with an algorithm that calculates the ideal parameters for growth. The larvae of the black soldier fly take between seven and 14 days to grow, depending on the type of feed required. They are then harvested and delivered direct to the animals without any need for processing or additives. Trials carried out in conjunction with Bristol University suggest the new feed source will also improve egg quality, bird activity and yields.

US market reopens to UK sheep meat

US authorities have removed a rule that prevented the UK exporting sheep meat to the US. This will allow Defra to work with the Department for International Trade and UK food safety authorities, as well as their US counterparts, to complete the final steps necessary to allow UK lamb exports to the US to resume. It is estimated that the market will be worth £37 million over the first five years of trade. More than 20 years ago the US banned imports of lamb from countries where the disease scrapie had been identified, such as the UK but also Canada and EU member states. The US action honours a commitment President Joe Biden made to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in September.

“Phenomenal level” of avian flu in the UK

The UK's chief veterinary officer says there is a "phenomenal level" of avian flu in the country. Dr Christine Middlemiss said there would be "huge human, animal, and trade implications" and that lessons learned from the foot-and-mouth outbreak are being used to try to control the outbreak. The vet said the disease is being spread by migratory birds flying from northern Russia and eastern Europe. The migratory season extends until March so it is likely heightened levels of biosecurity will be needed until then.

Dr Middlemiss' comments were echoed by Environment Secretary George Eustice who told Parliament "this year we are seeing the largest ever outbreak in the UK of avian influenza". A national avian influenza prevention zone and an additional housing order are in place. In total 40 premises are now believed to be affected; as infections are confirmed a 3km Protection Zone and 10km Surveillance Zone are put in place around the sites. Detail of the latest situation and control measures is available [here](#).

There is more plastic in soils than oceans

Whether it is images of debris washing up on beaches or marine life trapped in packaging, the problem of plastic waste in the oceans is at the forefront of the environmental crisis. However, a new study by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has shone a light on the issue of plastic debris in soil. It suggests that land used to grow food is likely to be contaminated with even more plastic pollutants than beaches and oceans. Plastics are widely used to boost productivity, whether that be the use of covers to reduce weed growth, tree guards which protect seedlings and saplings from disturbance by animals, or packaging to preserve the products of the industry. According to FAO data, agricultural value chains use 12.5 million tonnes of plastic products each year while another 37.3 million tonnes are used in food packaging. Crop production and livestock accounted for 10.2 million tonnes per year collectively. Of the estimated 6.3 billion tonnes of plastics produced before 2015, almost 80% has never been properly disposed of. In response to the findings, the FAO called for the development of a comprehensive voluntary code of conduct for all aspects of plastics throughout agri-food supply chains as well as more research, especially on the health impact of micro and nanoplastics. It also identified several circular solutions based on the “Refuse, Redesign, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and Recover” model.

Policy

Moorland burning rules to be reviewed

The Heather and Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021 came into force in May and were subject to an unsuccessful legal challenge by the campaign group Wild Justice in October. The regulations currently prevent the burning of vegetation in England on areas of deep peat (over 40cm deep) on a SSSI that is also a Special Area of Conservation or a Special Protection Area. Burning is still permitted in some circumstances such as on steep or rocky land or where a licence has been issued to allow the burning of vegetation for wildfire prevention or conservation purposes.

Wild Justice was refused permission for a judicial review of the regulations after it argued that they were unenforceable as there was no map of peat depth, ignore the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and breach the Habitats Regulations. In early December its appeal against this decision was also rejected. Despite this, environment minister Rebecca Pow has confirmed that the government will assess how the new regime has worked in practice once the current burning season ends in April.

Campaigners win right to appeal nutrient neutrality advice

Campaigners have been granted permission to appeal after losing a legal challenge against Natural England's nutrient neutrality advice earlier this year. In June 2020, Natural England advised that local planning authorities in the Solent region must ensure new developments are 'nitrate neutral', so that nearby habitats protected under the Habitats Regulations are not harmed. In May, lawyers acting for Brook Avenue Residents Against Development argued that Natural England's advice did not in fact reflect the requirements of the Habitats Regulations. As a result Fareham Borough Council's approval of a planning application to build eight houses on a 1.97 hectare site in Warsash, Hampshire, was unlawful. It was argued that Natural England's advice did not meet 'the standard of certainty' required by the Habitats Regulations and the Habitats Directive, but the judge, Mr Justice Jay, dismissed this ground for argument as a fundamental misunderstanding of how the precautionary principle works. The Court of Appeal has granted permission to appeal as it recognises that the case has connotations beyond the local area.

Environment & Natural Capital

Plants are responding to atmospheric changes

Plants are responding to increased concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by photosynthesising more. Between 1982 and 2020, global carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere grew about 17%, from 360 parts per million (ppm) to 420 ppm. According to a US study led by the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, plants are now photosynthesising 12% more now than they did in 1982. The additional carbon sequestered over the last 40 years is equivalent to the carbon emitted worldwide from burning fossil fuels in just 2020. The researchers are therefore keen to point out that while this has helped to slow global warming, it has by no means halted it. Not all of the additional carbon sequestered is stored. Photosynthesis creates water and glucose and plants use that glucose as their own source of energy via respiration, which goes on to release the captured carbon once again. It is also unclear how much capacity plants have to respond in this way before a saturation point is reached; “at that point land sinks will have a much lower capacity to offset our emissions” says Dr Trevor Keenan, adding that “land sinks are currently the only nature-based solution that we have in our toolkit to combat climate change”.

With that in mind, the UK government allocated over £12 million via the Nature for Climate Fund during National Tree Week. The funding has been split over four funds, each supporting tens of projects that hope to boost tree planting in the UK. Those funds are:

- The Local Authority Treescapes Fund, with 139 local authorities awarded a share of a £4.4 million pot across 42 projects that will see over a quarter of a million trees planted
- The third round of the Urban Tree Challenge Fund which will support 46 projects in England planting almost 25,000 trees
- The Woods into Management Forestry Innovation Fund will distribute almost £700,000 to 17 projects restoring biodiversity in vulnerable natural habitats
- The Tree Production Innovation Fund, which will make over £1 million available to 16 innovative projects striving to increase and diversify our domestic tree production.

Tree funding is also receiving a significant quantity of private finance too. In one notable case, AstraZeneca has revealed a £2 million plan to plant more than one million trees across the UK by 2025. The pharmaceutical giant and its global partner, One Tree Planted, will team up with Forestry England and the Borders Forest Trust as part of its wider ambition to plant and maintain 50 million trees worldwide and be zero carbon across its operations by the end of 2025. The company will not stop there, with plans to become carbon negative across its entire value chain by 2030.

Scotland: Environmental network launched

Farmers will be able to highlight their environmental work on a new webpage dedicated to encouraging the exchange of ideas. The Agriculture, Biodiversity and Climate Change Network (ABCCN) is a joint initiative between the Scottish government and industry. It will see the Farming for a Better Climate website launched, where farmers and crofters will be able to post a range of information, including videos and photos, to highlight the environmental measures they have undertaken and the results.

Property & Development

Off-grid phone masts trialled

Vodafone is trialling an off-grid mobile phone tower that it hopes will accelerate the company's journey to net zero by 2027. The so-called "Eco-Towers" will also tackle rural connectivity issues, enabling the deployment of new mobile sites in the most remote locations, and improve the security of supply. The tower uses Crossflow Energy's innovative wind turbine technology, combined with the latest in solar and battery technologies, to create a self-powered mobile network tower with no need for diesel backup generators.

Business & Economy

Changes to capital gains tax and inheritance tax shelved

Proposals to increase capital gains tax (CGT) rates have been shelved by the Chancellor. The Office of Tax Simplification (OTS) had recommended increasing rates to align them with income tax and lowering the annual tax-free allowance. However, many Conservative MPs argued that this would punish success. A letter written by the financial secretary to the treasury, Lucy Frazer, said "these reforms would involve a number of wider policy trade-offs and so careful thought must be given to the impact that they would have on taxpayers, as well as any additional administrative burden on HMRC." The government did accept some of the CGT recommendations including an expansion of the specific Rollover Relief rules which apply where land and buildings are acquired under Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO). It will now be possible to claim the relief against reinvestment into land already owned.

The letter also responded to the OTS's second report into inheritance tax (IHT). This was published in July 2019 and recommended simplify lifetime gift exemptions and changing the scope of reliefs such as those for business property and agricultural property. The government has decided not to proceed with any changes at the moment, but will bear the recommendations in mind if it considers reform of IHT in the future.

New attachés in priority markets

Eight new agri-food and drink attachés will be posted in priority markets to boost exports. Attachés are based in UK embassies and consulates overseas and have long-standing expertise in the agri-food and drink sector. As well as posts in China, USA, India, Canada and Mexico, the agri-food attachés will be covering growth markets in the Gulf, Africa, South America and the Asia-Pacific region. There will also be additional capacity and resource in Europe. The government says existing attachés in China and the United Arab Emirates have been pivotal in securing access for a greater range of products and driving export growth.

Other Rural News

“Hope hotels” could help rabbit population

The humble rabbit is being hailed as an “ecosystem engineer” and that is a problem in the UK, where populations are being decimated by disease. Landowners, who have long considered rabbits a pest, are now being encouraged to create “rabbit hotels” to revive numbers and therefore promote biodiversity. The hotels (piles of branches carefully arranged near existing rabbit warrens) provide safety from predators and new places to burrow and give birth to kits. The brush piles have already been successfully trialled by a four-year National Heritage lottery-funded project to restore rare species in the East Anglian Brecks.

And finally...

See it to baa-lieve it

Two sheep have been photographed peering through a rooftop in Cambridge, causing widespread bemusement and amusement on social media. It turns out the pair have been on the rooftop for a number of years but have been hidden from most people’s view. Hillary and Billary do come down from their rooftop sanctuary now and then, but only so they can be jet washed clean by owner Nicky Woodruff and her husband. Nicky said “someone got quite angry once, as they thought he was jet-washing a real dog”. Now is probably a good time to point out that the sheep are in fact only realistic models.

If you have queries regarding any of the articles, please contact Andrew Teanby.

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