

Food & Farming

Farmer confidence plunges

Farmer confidence is at its lowest level since before the Covid-19 pandemic. A survey of 613 farmers by the NFU revealed the majority were anticipating negative effects from a range of factors:

- 88% of respondents felt the soaring price of input costs such as energy, fuel and fertiliser would negatively affect their businesses
- 82% expect a negative impact from the phasing out of current farm support payments
- 72% of farmers feel they are being negatively affected by regulation and legislation
- Only 55% intend to engage with ELM schemes, down from 68% last year amid the ongoing uncertainty around its rollout

As a result, the short-term (one-year) outlook for farm business confidence is down by 15 points since the same time last year and the mid-term (three-year outlook) has fallen by seven points.

To revive confidence, actions in specific areas would prove popular with the majority:

- 86% of respondents would support a government strategy to avoid being undercut by imports
- 83% said an increase in output prices was either important or very important for confidence
- 77% said lower levels of input price inflation was important or very important

Quality assurance scheme for venison

A new scheme to boost consumers' confidence in the venison market has launched. The wild venison quality assurance scheme, which will be open to applicants in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, will ensure a set of audited standards are met throughout the supply chain. A similar scheme already exists in Scotland. Applicants must demonstrate they comply with the new scheme, ensuring carcasses are handled correctly, premises are registered as food businesses with the local authority, and that standards expected for producing food are met in line with relevant regulations and best practice, ensuring that full traceability occurs.

The UK's deer population is believed to be at its highest level for 1,000 years, with some two million deer spread across the nation. A growing deer population with no natural predator puts more browsing pressure on ecosystems, potentially causing more harm than good. Increased wild deer management is therefore considered essential and the new scheme is believed to be one way to encourage this.

Agricultural innovation at Climate Summit

The UK made a £3 million investment to develop more sustainable fertilisers at the Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate (AIM for Climate) Summit. The UK's investment will fund a new Efficient Fertiliser Consortium, part of the wider US-led Global Fertiliser Challenge. The Challenge intends to develop, test and scale up new and alternative fertilisers that can enhance soil health, agricultural productivity and the sustainability of agriculture globally. AIM for Climate was launched during the UK's Presidency of COP26 and seeks to increase investment in climate smart agricultural innovation.

Policy

Replacing the Basic Payment Scheme

Defra has released guidance on delinked payments. It plans to replace the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) in England with delinked payments in 2024, making the 2023 scheme year the last year of BPS. The Rural Payments Agency will pay delinked payments each year from 2024 to 2027, with the amount paid decreasing annually as progressive reductions are applied due to the agricultural transition. The amount received will be informed by the 'reference amount'; the average BPS payment in the 'reference period', which is the BPS 2020 to 2022 scheme years. Where businesses have changed during this period there is scope to transfer the reference amount. For more information on the eligibility conditions for delinked payments, consult our Rural Research Briefing Note.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

The government has published detailed guidance for 'responsible authorities' on the creation and publication of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). Defra has yet to confirm the identity of 'responsible authorities' but has made it clear LNRS are intended to inform the local planning process. LNRS are required by the Environment Act 2021 to identify locations and specify proposals for creating or improving habitat which are likely to have the greatest positive impacts.

Creation of the LNRS will be a collaborative process involving local partners, communities and those who own and manage the land. Although created and monitored by the responsible authority, delivery against the LNRS will be a shared effort between public, private and voluntary stakeholders. The habitat creation and biodiversity improvements that they steer will be funded from multiple sources including mandatory biodiversity net gain and a strengthened biodiversity duty on public authorities.

What type of condiment is Natural England?

Natural England may become "akin to margarine" according to Trudy Harrison MP, Defra minister for the natural environment. Elaborating on the comment, she said the organisation could become spread too thin and rather ineffective given the work that needed doing to protect nature. The comments come after ministers suggested Natural England may wield too much power over species reintroduction policy. Ms Harrison said her more pressing concern with the regulator was its resourcing, rather than its powers. Conservative MP Julian Sturdy responded, saying the regulator was "more like marmite" and asked if it could be reined in if required. Harrison reassured the Environment, Farming, and Rural Affairs committee that the regulator could, and she felt it was doing a very good job.

Tackling Defra's ageing digital services

Defra is taking steps to enhance its cybersecurity and protect its IT systems against threats after a [report](#) declared its systems to be outdated. The report, entitled "Tackling Defra's ageing digital services", was produced by the Public Accounts Committee and concluded Defra does not have a long-term strategy for its wider digital transformation. It also said many users of Defra's systems consider them not to be user friendly and to be outdated due to a reliance on paper forms and documents.

Environment & Natural Capital

King's Coronation to leave lasting legacy

To mark the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III, a number of initiatives will be launched with the goal of leaving a lasting public legacy for people and nature. A new 'King's Series of National Nature Reserves' will be created, with five major National Nature Reserve (NNR) declarations per year for the next five years. The first, the 'Lincolnshire Coronation Coast NNR', will be introduced by Natural England this summer and will be over 21 square miles. It will encompass a variety of habitats including sand dunes, saltmarsh, mudflats and freshwater marshes. The locations for the other four 'King's Series National Nature Reserves' for the 2023-2024 year will be announced at a later date, but are likely to include The Mendip Hills in Somerset, Moccas Park in Herefordshire, Ingleborough in North Yorkshire and Lullington in East Sussex.

The 'Coronation Woods' will also be developed between April 2023 and March 2025. Forestry England will create new woodland on land it buys while Defra will provide up to £2.5 million of funding for communities in England to plant trees as a permanent reminder of the Coronation in their local areas.

The England Coast Path is to be renamed the 'King Charles III England Coast Path'. Natural England has worked in partnership with local access authorities to open 794 miles of the route so far and the trail will be fully walkable by the end of 2024. The trail will eventually consist of a 2,700 mile long National Trail around the whole of the English coast.

First prosecution under peat burning rules

The owners of a shooting estate have been successfully prosecuted for carrying out illegal burning of vegetation. The owner of Midhope Moor, an estate in the Peak District National Park, pleaded guilty to multiple breaches of the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations which were introduced in 2021. Under the regulations, it is prohibited to burn specified vegetation on a designated site on peat that is of a depth of more than 40 centimetres, except under licence issued by the secretary of state. Following a report from the RSPB, Defra visited the site and found evidence of 30 burns within a site of special scientific interest. All of the 15 samples taken were found to be on peat greater in depth than 50 centimetres. The estate was charged with six counts of breaching the regulations and undertaking burning on deep peat without a licence in October 2022. It was fined £300 for each offence, costs of £125 and a surcharge of £720; a total of £2,645.

Atlantic rainforest recovery locations revealed

The Isle of Man and North Wales are the first places to benefit from the rainforest recovery programme. The Wildlife Trusts intend to restore and expand rainforests across the British Isles, following a donation of £38 million from Aviva. British rainforests have been largely destroyed over hundreds of years and now cover less than 1% of the nation. The first two sites are Creg y Cowin in the Isle of Man and Bryn Ifan in North Wales. Over 70 acres at Creg y Cowin will be planted with native tree species and around 20 acres allowed to regenerate naturally. Non-planted areas of lowland heath, fen-meadow, waxcap grassland and ponds will provide further habitat for wildlife. Over 100 acres of rainforest on the coastal slopes of Bwlch Mawr, the mountain overlooking Bryn Ifan, will be planted with a mix of sympathetic native planting and natural regeneration.

The Thousand Year Trust, a newly launched charity, is also seeking to restore Britain's temperate rainforest. The charity has been launched by Merlin Hanbury-Tenison, who suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after three tours of Afghanistan. The veteran said the forest at Cabilla, close to Hanbury-Tenison's family farm, was a large part of what stopped him from getting "really unwell". After taking over his family farm, he found the temperate rainforest still surviving in the area and now has the goal of tripling Cornwall's estimated 1,200-1,600 hectares of rainforest in the next 30 years. 100,000 trees are being planted at Cabilla to add to its 40 hectares of rainforest, but 40% of the forest restoration will be via natural regeneration, with the process accelerated by the rooting and seed-spreading of free-roaming pigs and protection for jays that bury acorns and inadvertently plant oaks.

Projected emissions reductions fall short

The government's plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from farming and land use fall short of pledges made in its original net zero strategy. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature's (WWF) analysis of the government's Carbon Budget Delivery Plan, the total projected emissions reductions up to 2037 were 58% less than the emissions reduction figures outlined in the initial strategy. WWF said this 58% gap is equivalent to the emissions of the entire UK building sector and puts farming and land use on track to become the third largest source of emissions by 2035. The total projected emission benefits from tree planting up to 2037 are also 85% lower than previously claimed while emissions benefits from peatland restoration are 80% lower.

Property & Development

BNG: what counts?

What counts towards a development's biodiversity net gain (BNG) obligation? The government has confirmed habitat enhancement can be counted towards BNG if the habitat is created to:

- Comply with a statutory obligation or policy, for example green infrastructure or sustainable drainage
- Provide river basin management plan (RBMP) mitigation and enhancement measures
- Provide mitigation or compensation for protected species or sites, for example nutrient mitigation.

Habitat enhancement cannot be counted if it is already done for:

- Restocking conditions relating to a tree felling licence or a restocking notice
- Marine licensing
- Remediation under the environmental damage regulations

This confirmation means it could be feasible to generate BNG certificates and nutrient neutrality credits from the same mitigation site. If you would like to discuss further please contact [Johnny Campbell](#).

Cheaper energy for backing onshore wind

Communities that back local onshore wind could be rewarded with cheaper energy bills. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) has announced new reward schemes as part of proposals that the government hopes will create a localist approach to onshore wind development. Onshore wind was effectively banned by planning criteria introduced in 2015 by then-Prime Minister David Cameron. In the new consultation document, DESNZ recognises this and said it hopes new proposals would allow local authorities more flexibility to respond to views of their local communities. Developers in England currently commit to provide £5,000 per megawatt of installed capacity, or equivalent benefits-in-kind, to the local community. The government is proposing that new benefits, such as energy bill discounts, are added to these current reward schemes. This would be agreed between developers and communities on a case-by-case basis. The [consultation](#) closes on 7 July.

Solar farm connects directly to grid

Larks Green solar farm has become the UK's first to connect directly to the national grid. Ordinarily, solar farms and rooftop solar is connected to distribution networks, however the 50MW facility near Bristol has run a high-voltage cable from the solar panels to Iron Acton substation, potentially demonstrating a new way of relieving pressure on

the wider electricity grid. Developers are routinely being told they will have to wait until the 2030s to achieve a connection and in one case a company was told it would have to wait until 2037.

Scotland gets get major 4G boost

The first UK government-funded rural mast upgrade has been completed in the Lockerbie area of Scotland. It is hoped the mast will deliver 4G coverage to residents in the east of Dumfries and Galloway, such as those living in Boreland, Eskdalemuir, Lochmaben and other neighbouring villages. This is the first time the four major mobile network operators have collaborated to share a mobile mast, offering customers in the area more choice. The mast was constructed as part of the government's £1 billion Shared Rural Network programme, with more than 120 similar masts in Scotland in line for upgrades.

Business & Economy

Protect upland farms on the brink

A coalition of farming organisations is demanding the creation of a fund for uplands resilience. Representatives from Sustain, the Nature Friendly Farming Network, Tenant Farmers Association and Pasture for Life signed a [letter](#) to farming minister Mark Spencer, which said many upland farms were on the brink of going out of business. In the letter, the coalition ask for:

- Better access to independent business resilience advice
- Support for local food supply
- Investment in agri-environment tourism
- Implementation of the Rock Review recommendations.

Speaking during a Westminster Hall debate, Cumbrian Lib Dem MP Tim Farron has also accused Defra of betraying hill farmers. Mr Farron agreed that a transition from area-based direct payments to ELM made sense. However, he said the failure to deliver ELMs has left upland farmers scrambling to fill the gap left by the removal of BPS payments. He argued the decision to pursue the income-foregone model would force upland farmers to farm more intensively and risked undoing the positive work done over many years.

Car recharging providers join forces

Eighteen of the largest of Britain's electric car recharging network providers have created a trade association called ChargeUK. It wants the government to resolve planning and grid connection restraints that are holding back better charging infrastructure and the rollout of electric vehicles. The group includes BP and Shell but Tesla has yet to join.

Other Rural News

And finally... You're kidding me

Officers of the Enid police department in the US state of Oklahoma reacted rapidly to reports of a man crying out for help. Throughout the bodycam [footage](#), the repeated calls can be heard alongside the barking of a dog and the sound of the officers' frantic footsteps, rushing towards the scene of the incident. On arrival, they discovered the source of the desperate cries; a goat which had been separated from its friend. Enid Police Department said in a pun-filled statement on Facebook "sometimes a call can really get your goat... All in all, you really can't say it was that baaad of a call."

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

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