

Landscape

Rural – UK – 18 March 2026

Food & Farming

How the Middle East conflict could impact rural Britain

Conflict in the Middle East is impacting UK agricultural markets, with May 2026 feed wheat futures briefly rallying to £175.40/t, the highest level since November, before settling around £170/t, still well above last month's prices. The uplift offers a short-term selling opportunity for growers, providing welcome cashflow at a time when fuel and fertiliser costs are also rising sharply. Global grain supplies remain comfortable, which reduces the potential of major price spikes.

Significant pressure is expected from the oil and gas markets. Although Iranian oil contributes only 4.5% of global supply, ongoing disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's energy shipments pass, has pushed up prices dramatically. The NFU says previous energy shocks show how quickly UK fuel and fertiliser prices can surge, and notes farmers are already experiencing price opacity, with some not given a confirmed price until delivery. The NFU warns that input demand will escalate in the coming weeks as spring planting accelerates, and any further escalation could significantly affect costs for the 2027 harvest. This lack of transparency is particularly challenging for livestock farmers who often buy fertiliser as needed, and for horticulture, which relies on secure access to natural gas.

Rural households are also feeling the impact, with heating oil prices nearly tripling since the conflict began. The 1.7 million UK homes which rely on heating oil may now face sudden, unaffordable increases as Ofgem's price cap does not cover it. Much will depend on how events unfold in the coming weeks, but rising energy costs are already adding pressure to farm businesses and rural communities.

Avian influenza vaccine trials begin

New targeted trials to combat highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) have begun in England, marking a significant step forward in efforts to protect both wild and captive bird populations. Launched on 5 March, the 24-week study focuses on turkeys, as one of the species most vulnerable to rapid, high-mortality outbreaks. The trial will test UK/EU-approved vaccines under strict conditions, with the aim of generating evidence on immune response, field performance and how vaccination could be safely integrated into the UK's disease control strategy.

HPAI has caused unprecedented disruption since 2020, costing the UK up to £174 million annually. Ministers and veterinary leaders described the trial as a critical opportunity to strengthen long-term resilience, while stressing stringent biosecurity remains essential. Results will also contribute to wider international research, with similar studies underway in Europe. Bird keepers are urged to stay vigilant, maintain strong biosecurity and report any signs of disease promptly.

Wales: Sustainable Farming Scheme opens

Farmers in Wales can now apply to the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) for the first time, as the Single Application Form (SAF) window opened from 2 March until 15 May 2026. Applicants must indicate whether they are claiming SFS or the Basic Payment Scheme, and the Welsh Government is strongly encouraging farmers to begin the process early to allow time to address any queries ahead of the deadline. Farmers needing to amend field data, such as land boundaries, must do so through the Manage My Land system before submitting their SAF.

Producers are also advised to review the SFS Universal Actions, many of which they may already be undertaking, such as soil testing, benchmarking, and habitat management. Habitats and key features can be checked through SFS maps on RPW Online. Deputy First Minister Huw Irranca-Davies described the launch as a landmark moment, emphasising the scheme rewards sustainable food production. Further details on the Optional and Collaborative layers will follow by the end of March, with applications opening later in the year. Our briefing note on the scheme is available [here](#).

Near-record infection risk for sugar beet virus

Sugar beet growers are facing a high-risk season for virus yellows, a plant pathogenic virus transmitted by multiple species of aphid. Rothamsted Research forecasts warn 59% of the UK crop could become infected in 2026 without control measures, one of the highest threat levels recorded. The first aphids are predicted to begin flying on 22 April, following a warmer-than-average February that helped populations survive despite January frosts. The industry has not seen comparable pressure since 2020, when infection rates reached 38% and yields fell by around 25%. Growers are urged to monitor fields closely and use the approved three-spray aphicide programme, applying treatments promptly once thresholds are reached.

Policy

Lead shot banned from 1 April 2029

The government has confirmed the sale and use of lead shot for live quarry and clay shooting will be fully banned from 1 April 2029, following a three-year transition period beginning this year. From this date, using shotgun cartridges loaded with lead shot for game shooting will be an offence across England, Scotland and Wales. A statutory instrument implementing the changes comes into force on 1 April 2026, covering all decisions on lead use in both live quarry and target shooting.

Restrictions will also apply to rifle ammunition of .243 calibre and above, effective from 2029, while smaller calibres and air weapons remain exempt. Target ranges may only use lead bullets if they meet new lead recovery standards by April 2028. The Countryside Alliance supports the shift to non-lead alternatives but warns the three-year transition will be challenging for manufacturers already coping with global supply pressures. The UK's timetable now mirrors the EU's shortened three-year transition period.

Lords revolt over fly-tipping law

Farmers may soon be freed from the long-criticised obligation to pay for removing fly-tipped waste after the government suffered a defeat in the House of Lords. Under current rules, landowners must clear illegally dumped rubbish or face prosecution, a system campaigners say punishes victims while offenders often avoid consequences. New Defra figures show fly-tipping rose 9% in 2024/25 to 1.26 million incidents, though this excludes most farmland, meaning the true scale is far higher. Of the reported cases, councils undertook 572,000 enforcement actions. Of these, almost 400,000 were investigations, meaning fewer than 200,000 actions resulted in sanctions such as warning letters.

Peers backed two amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill, designed to shift responsibility towards offenders and local authorities, encouraging stronger coordination between police and waste authorities to help ensure landowners are not left covering clean-up costs. Amendment 13 would make convicted fly-tippers responsible for the cost of clearing waste and Amendment 21 would place a duty on councils to remove dumped waste and then pursue cost recovery. Despite government opposition, both amendments passed, prompting strong backing from rural groups, including the Countryside Alliance. The proposals now move to the Commons, where MPs will decide how the amendments progress.

High Court to hear IHT case in March

An urgent High Court hearing on 17 and 18 March will examine whether the government acted unlawfully in pushing through major changes to Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief without proper consultation. The challenge comes as farmers continue to struggle with uncertainty created by the post-Budget 2024 inheritance tax restrictions and delayed draft legislation. New polling by Family Business UK shows that nine in ten family-owned firms expect to be affected by the incoming inheritance tax regime. A survey of more than 500 leaders of family businesses revealed that 55% of companies with 10 to 49 workers believe next month's changes will significantly affect how their firm operates. Among businesses with 100 to 250 employees, 64% said the same.

Environment & Natural Capital

Wales: next steps for Environment Bill

The Environment (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Bill has been passed by the Senedd and now awaits Royal Assent. This Bill will lead to the establishment of the Office of Environmental Governance Wales, as well as introducing a requirement for new environmental principles to be applied when creating new policy, and a statutory target for biodiversity. The legislation will fill the environmental governance gap in Wales created by Brexit.

The Welsh Government has two years after the Bill receives Royal Assent to establish the body as a legal entity. In the interim, steps such as appointing a chair and a chief executive will need to be taken. There is also a two-year deadline to lay regulations for the new environmental targets. A draft version of an environmental principles statement will likely be put out for consultation over the summer, with final publication by 31 March 2027.

Scotland: forestry agency failed in EIA screening decision

Activists have succeeded in a legal challenge against Scottish Forestry's decision that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not needed for the planting of a Sitka spruce forest in the Scottish Borders. The Todrig New Woodland Creation project covers 579 hectares, 42% of which would be Sitka spruce. In December 2024, Scottish Forestry decided the project did not require EIA consent; however, environmental campaign group Restore Nature challenged the decision. Among the reasons cited for the challenge was the failure to consider the presence of the northern brown argus butterfly on the site, which features on the Scottish Government's biodiversity list.

The Court of Session held that where a specific risk to a protected species is identified, it must be explicitly assessed. Second, the court found shortcomings in the assessment of landscape impacts. However, the court rejected arguments that the scheme amounted to a monoculture, noting Sitka spruce planting levels complied with forestry standards and were balanced with other habitats. As a result, the screening decision must be reconsidered, although Scottish Forestry has 21 days to appeal. Restore Nature said the ruling reinforces the need for robust environmental scrutiny of large-scale forestry developments. If you would like advice on woodland creation, please contact our [forestry team](#).

Wales boosts tree planting grants

Landowners in Wales can apply for enhanced tree-planting grants. Recent grants provide as much as £13,294 per hectare, covering 12 years of maintenance and premium payments, depending on the type of planting chosen. Additionally, a new incentive of £825 per hectare is now offered for establishing native broadleaf woodland, which must contain no more than 20% conifers, and deliver a minimum of 800 stems per hectare. For those joining the Sustainable Farming Scheme, there is a Universal Action to complete a Tree and Hedgerow Planting Opportunity Plan, and to undertake at least 0.1 hectare of planting by the end of 2028. The support available under these tree planting grants are additional payments above the Universal Payment and are available to support tree planting and encourage planting beyond the minimum requirement.

Property & Development

Historic England guide for creative reuse of heritage buildings

A new guide from Historic England offers advice on transforming unused heritage buildings into creative hubs. The new research, summarised in the [Heritage Works for Creative Businesses](#) guide, says creative businesses highly value the unique character of historic buildings and are often willing to work within their constraints. Furthermore, many underused heritage assets, such as factories, stables, churches and even former baths, were found to be suitable for creative uses. For effective partnerships, the guide suggests flexible leases and adaptable space sizes. Specialist facilities like print workshops, recording studios, or film suites may be required, along with dependable high-speed internet. It recommends first delivering basic studios at sub-market rents with flexible leases. Successful collaboration can then deliver rental income that funds gradual building upgrades, as well as create a vibrant space that attracts “higher-value users and trigger a virtuous cycle of rising demand and further investment.” For more information on heritage buildings, please contact [Andrew McRoyall](#).

Infrastructure pipeline jumps to £718 billion

The total value of projects in the government's Infrastructure Pipeline tool has hit £718 billion. The National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) has updated the Infrastructure Pipeline for the first time since its launch last summer. According to NISTA's new figures, £252 billion will be publicly financed and £466 billion will be delivered through private or a mix of public and private financing. Over 10 years, 51% of the planned investment is in energy, 16% in transport, 11% in health and social care and 9% in water and wastewater.

The tool's half-year update includes a range of methodology and reporting updates too, and now includes a workforce demand analysis function. This suggests that an estimated annual average workforce of between 621,000 and 697,000 over the next two years, and between 629,000 and 706,000 over the next five years, will be required to deliver the planned investment currently in the pipeline.

Business & Economy

UK beef hits US shelves

The inaugural tariff-free shipment of UK beef has successfully reached the United States. Exported by Foyle Food Group, based in Northern Ireland, this consignment is valued at over £190,000 and benefits from approximately £50,000 in tariff savings. It marks the first delivery under a new reciprocal 13,000-tonne tariff-free beef quota established between the UK and the US. Should the quota be fully utilised, it could generate up to £70 million in annual revenue for the UK beef industry. The preferential quota is a significant step forward for the UK's beef industry because our previous access arrangements were in competition with other nations, and Brazil filled the quota within the first six days of 2026. The United States remains a significant destination for UK food and drink exports, which exceeded £25 billion globally last year, including £2 billion to the US.

This achievement coincided with the UK's first dedicated agri-food trade mission to Washington, DC, led by Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds and attended by senior representatives from the National Farmers Union, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the International Meat Trade Association, and the Scotch Whisky Association. During the visit, UK exporters will participate in the Annual Meat Conference in the US and engage in a Food and Drink Showcase at the British Ambassador's Residence, promoting key products such as beef, dairy, seafood, spirits, and English sparkling wine.

Start preparing now for the UK-EU SPS Agreement

Businesses in the agri-food sector should start preparing now for the UK-EU Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement. The government is working toward a mid-2027 start date for the agreement, which it says will cut costs and remove barriers for businesses, including:

- Export Health Certificates costing up to £200 for agri-food goods.
- Phytosanitary Certificates costing approximately £25 alongside inspection fees of at least £127.60.
- Organic Certificates of Inspection, required for the export of organic lamb and cheese, costing on average £35.
- Port Health Authority identity check fees on meat and dairy exports, adding £31 per load on average.
- Sampling, which can add approximately £1,200 to a cheese load, £1,400 to a salmon shipment, and £1,200 to a beef load.

Under the proposed agreement, UK companies involved in making or processing plants, food, animals, and animal products would have to align with EU regulations. This requirement would apply to domestic and global businesses, meaning even firms not currently exporting to the EU may still need to adapt. A [call for information](#) has been launched to help the government assess the agreement's impact and identify any support that may be needed. It runs until 23 April 2026.

Other Rural News

And finally... Life blooms in Death Valley

Death Valley, known for being the hottest place on Earth and the driest place in North America, is currently blanketed in wildflowers. An unusually wet autumn, featuring a record rainfall of 61mm, soaked flower seeds and washed away their protective coatings, prompting germination. A wetter than usual winter then provided the steady moisture needed for roots to establish in terrain that's normally barren. Now, bright yellow desert gold is leading the display, joined by brown-eyed primrose, grape soda lupine and delicate desert star. Low elevation blooms should last into mid to late-March, with higher-altitude flowers expected from April through June. So far, experts are calling it an "above average bloom", not quite a full blown "superbloom" like those seen in 1998, 2005 and 2016... at least, not yet.

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