

Food & Farming

Warning over slurry fumes

Farmers have been warned about the dangers of slurry mixing after four narrow escapes in quick succession. One farmer in Northern Ireland collapsed and was only saved because another worker saw the incident happen. Hydrogen sulphide is one of several gasses released during the mixing process. Inhalation causes breathing difficulties and disorientation and it is potentially fatal at high concentrations. The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland has reminded farmers to follow its [slurry mixing code](#). It emphasises that people should not go to assist someone who is in difficulty without first alerting the emergency services.

UK could lead in nature-friendly farming

The Soil Association thinks the UK could go further than the EU in delivering nature-friendly farming. It believes this can happen whatever the outcome of Brexit may be, but needs “radical” changes to UK food and farming policy. A new Soil Association [report](#) makes six proposals for the UK countryside outside of the EU:

- Introduce a national agroforestry strategy to encourage agroforestry at scale
- Invest in soil to increase soil organic matter and consequently water holding capacity
- Expand organic farming
- Improve animal welfare
- Back farmer innovation
- Capitalise on public procurement opportunities

Not all meat has the same impact

Presenting the case for 100% grass-fed cattle and sheep to be considered part of the solution to global warming rather than the problem, a Pasture-Fed Livestock Association [report](#) cites evidence that grazing animals can help to mitigate global warming while improving the productivity of soils. The Association argues that livestock raised on pasture land have proven health benefits, higher animal welfare standards and are more efficient than grain fed systems. It points out that two-thirds of both UK and global farmland is pasture and so it makes sense to graze the livestock there rather than on grains. Grazing animals fed solely on pasture have few, if any, additional life cycle emissions, according to the report.

Policy

‘Net zero’ emissions: an agricultural opportunity?

Prime Minister Theresa May has committed the UK to a legally-binding ‘net zero’ emissions target by 2050, a move described by Greenpeace as “having the potential to be a really big deal”. Mrs May said there was a “moral duty to leave this world in a better condition than what we inherited”. Net zero means those emissions that cannot be avoided must be offset, so whilst reducing emissions will be a challenge for agriculture, it also strengthens the case for providing offsetting services to others. Green groups have widely praised the announcement but others fear the phase-out is either too little, too late or outright impossible. MPs had already agreed to reduce emissions by 80% under the Climate Change Act in 2008 but this will now be changed.

The NFU says the farming industry is “ready to play our part in tackling climate change”. The organisation has said it aims for agriculture to reach net zero by 2040. The CLA also welcomed the announcement but cautioned that “now comes the difficult job of creating workable policies which will ensure the UK leads by example in delivery too”.

Ag budget slashed if ELMS take-up is low

The National Audit Office (NAO) has “serious concerns” about Defra’s Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS). Its [Early review of the new farming programme](#) acknowledges that farmers need predictability and have been affected by Defra’s poor implementation in the past. It is concerned that this new, larger undertaking will “move

too quickly” and that key elements “will not be in place”. The review notes how the programme relies upon ambitious estimates of take-up but is leaving farmers with little time to adapt to changes. What farmers will be paid for and how much is still unknown. It therefore recommends implementing a plan with realistic timescales that is flexible and based on a thorough understanding of interdependencies.

Labour’s plans for England’s land?

Policy proposals for the Labour Party seek to “put land where it belongs: at the heart of political debate”. [Land for the Many](#), written by economists for the Labour party, suggests some radical changes to the rural economy:

- A ministerial lock on disposal of county farms and potentially breaking some up into smaller units and offering tenancies at below-market rates
- Encouraging Community Land Trusts to buy rural land by creating a Community Land Fund
- Protecting agricultural ties on dwellings and facilitating new land worker dwellings
- Extending the planning system to cover major farming and forestry decisions
- Establishing a Right to Roam across all uncultivated land and water
- Establishing bodies modelled on the Scottish Land Commission

There are further proposals to create new urban green spaces, provide allotments and implement higher taxes on empty or second homes.

Wales: Single scheme post-Brexit

Welsh agricultural subsidies were originally due to be replaced by an Economic Resilience Scheme and a Public Goods Scheme. Following consultation the Welsh Government has decided instead to create a single sustainable land management scheme. The changes form part of the [Welsh Government’s](#) response to the Brexit and our Land consultation. It outlines an ambition for “sustainable farms producing both food and public goods”. A consultation on the policy changes will open before the Royal Welsh Show starts on 22 July.

Environment & Natural Capital

General licences update

Three new [general licences](#) have been announced for the killing or taking of wild birds in England. They will allow the control of certain species to:

- Conserve wild birds and flora or fauna
- Preserve public health or public safety
- Prevent serious damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber, fisheries or inland waters

The licences will be valid until 29 February 2020 with a longer term review of general licences in the meantime. Sir Jim Paice, GWCT chairman, congratulated Defra on producing them so quickly. The decision is based upon 3,952 submissions made during Defra’s recent call for evidence, the majority of which were submitted by individuals or smaller organisations with 36 local and national organisations also responding. A range of impacts have been mentioned including crow attacks on lambs, the predation of eggs and public health issues caused by pigeons. Defra said it “recognises the unintended consequences of Natural England’s decision” and “acknowledge the need to address this situation quickly”.

Rewild to avoid catastrophic effects

Scientific advisors to the UK and Scottish governments say one-fifth of all farmland should be returned to wilderness to help reduce global heating and limit the damage it causes. MPs in Westminster will debate rewilding after a petition gained more than 100,000 signatures. The petition calls for “a bold financial and political commitment to nature’s recovery... to avoid the catastrophic effects of climate breakdown”. Francesca Osowska, chief executive of Scottish Natural Heritage, recently warned that Scotland could resemble an “apocalypse” by 2030 if action is not taken to limit the climate change emergency. She went on to say “by working with nature we can help mollify the climate and... sustain a far healthier and more resilient environment”. The Scottish Government agreed there was an “urgent need to respond to the global climate emergency”.

Untrimmed hedgerows benefit bats

Research by the University of Bristol and Bat Conservation Society found three of Britain’s rarest bat species are more abundant in untrimmed hedgerows. Scientists monitored the wildlife in 64 hedges in various states of trim over the summer of 2016. They found the species richness of both insects and bats significantly increased with time since last trimming, suggesting that hedges should be left untrimmed for up to 10 years. The NFU disagreed with

the 10 year recommendation, saying “Many farmers are in voluntary agri-environment schemes that help deliver an array of environmental benefits including increased wildlife”. Defra said the new Environmental Land Management Scheme would include “rewarding farmers for protecting hedgerows and enabling wildlife to thrive”.

Doctors’ orders: a walk in the woods

Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing) is incredibly popular in Japan. Five million people now take time to walk through woodland and improve their mental well-being. It also seems to have royal approval, as the Duchess of Cambridge is said to have been inspired by forest bathing when she co-designed a garden at Chelsea Flower Show. Now the Woodland Trust has urged family doctors to prescribe it for conditions such as anxiety and depression. Forestry England also approves, saying “being calm and quiet among the trees... can help adults and children to de-stress and boost health and wellbeing in a natural way”. Studies suggest the positive effect of being amongst nature improves mental wellbeing for hours and can also lower blood pressure.

Property & Development

Payments restored for small scale renewables

The closure of the Feed in Tariff scheme in April meant new small scale renewable energy generators couldn’t be paid for the power which they exported to the grid. This has now been remedied, as last week the Government introduced the Smart Export Guarantee (SEG). Suppliers with over 150,000 domestic customers are required to offer a minimum SEG tariff by 31 December 2019. However, it is not yet clear exactly how much generators will get paid for the exported power. There is provision to prevent negative pricing, i.e. having to pay the suppliers to take your electricity, which may sound far-fetched but is a real phenomenon and occurred for a record six hours on Sunday 24 March 2019. There are already private market alternatives for small scale generators to sell power to the grid: Octopus Energy and E.ON both offer fixed prices of 5.24p/kWh. In order to qualify for the SEG, a Smart Meter will be required as half hourly readings are needed. We think this is a welcome development which allows homeowners to benefit from the cheap cost of generating electricity on site. It is only the start of the new scheme, which will most likely have to adapt over the first few years, but coupled with Theresa May’s announcement committing the UK to becoming 100% net carbon neutral by 2050, it feels that a sustainable energy policy is starting to gain momentum in the UK.

Trains used as village halls

Pacer trains, the workhorses of the north’s rail network, could be used as public spaces like village halls or cafes when they are taken out of service. The Government has launched a [competition](#) and is inviting community groups to put forward ideas to reuse an old Pacer train carriage. Described as “buses on tracks” the trains were only intended for short term use but have been regularly deployed on busy commuter routes across the North and Midlands. The Government says they have ‘outstayed their welcome’ and will be replaced by 101 new trains worth £500 million.

Business & Economy

Ocado invests in vertical farming

Online supermarket Ocado will invest £17 million in developing vertical farms. It has already bought a 58% stake in Jones Food, a vertical farm near Scunthorpe which grows 420 tonnes of basil, parsley and coriander a year with only eight employees. The farm maintains a sterile growing area, recycles all its water, does not use pesticides and is powered by renewable energy. Ocado suggests that it may build 10 similar facilities within five years. The investment also includes a joint venture with the US-based vertical farming company 80 Acres Farms and a horticultural technology provider from the Netherlands called Priva. The venture, called Infinite Acres, is a four year project to develop pre-fabricated vertical farming systems that can be sold to other businesses.

Flood defences save £1.1 billion

Flooding could cost the UK £1.8 billion per year, but with a network of inland river barriers and defences that cost could be reduced to £0.7 billion; a saving of £1.1 billion. [Modelling](#) was based on thousands of simulated weather events with and without the defences in place. Residential property benefits from 42% of that saving according to the Association of British Insurers. The benefits are greatest when flood defences protect against smaller, more frequent flooding events where they reduce the cost of damage by an average of 68%.

Other Rural News

And finally... The avocado toast index

Ever wondered how many slices of avocado toast you would have to forego to afford a house deposit in Mexico City? Well the BBC has the answer; 3,123. That's a lot less than London where both avocado toast and houses are more expensive (\$7 and \$857,473 respectively). The avocado toast index looked at the relative cost of a deposit and a piece of avocado toast across 10 cities. Tim Gurner, an Australian property developer, suggested that millennials would rather have a piece of avocado toast every morning than a house. It would take Londoners 67 years to save for a deposit by foregoing 24,499 servings of their Instagrammable breakfast. That's 13 years more than in Hong Kong, 34 more than New York and 56 more than Johannesburg.

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