

Food & Farming

Farmers with SFI agreements to receive early payment

On 18 September farmers who had pre-registered their interest in the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) 2023 began to be invited to submit applications. Those who apply for and accept an SFI agreement before the end of the year will now receive an accelerated payment. To recognise the challenges posed by inflation and rising costs Defra is going to pay out 25% of the value of an agreement in the first month.

The announcement was made as part of a package of measures on Back British Farming Day, others included support for highlighting British produce when consumers shop online, confirmation that farmers producing sustainable British food under the environmental land management schemes will be able to use them to help meet public procurement standards. Five additional agri-food attachés to promote British food abroad will also be recruited.

To increase fairness in the supply chain and access to markets, Defra plans to remove unnecessary burdens on small abattoirs. A £4 million Small Abattoir Fund will also launch before the end of the year. The Farming in Protected Landscape (FiPL) programme will also be extended by a further year until March 2025 with an additional £10 million of funding.

Calf housing grant open for applications

Applications can now be made for calf housing grants of between £15,000 and £500,000. To be eligible, applicants must be existing cattle farmers carrying out farming activity, including calf rearing, with 11 or more cattle. Any buildings built or upgraded with money from the grant must be located in England. The grant is part of a wider suite of funding opportunities that make up the Animal Health and Welfare Infrastructure grants. Applications follow a three-step process; an online checker, an ambient environment assessment and finally the full application. The online checker must be completed by 30 November 2023. If successful at this first stage, applicants will be invited to move on to step two. If you would like to discuss grant opportunities please contact [Georgina Sweeting](#).

Nestlé to make fertiliser from Kit Kat production waste

Nestlé is running a two-year trial to evaluate a low-carbon fertiliser manufactured from coca shells from its Kit Kat and Aero factory in York. If successful up to 7,000 tonnes a year could be manufactured and used to meet around 25% of the fertiliser requirement for the wheat in its UK supply chain.

Policy

Nutrient neutrality and nature-based solutions

The government's plan to amend the regulations responsible for nutrient neutrality requirements has failed. Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove unveiled proposals to relax nutrient neutrality measures to free up stalled developments in England. The proposal attracted criticism as it was considered to reduce environmental protections and lacked an obligation to fund the accompanying mitigation process. The proposal was rejected by the House of Lords on 13 September 2023 (203 votes to 156). By voting against the amendment, the Lords have ensured it cannot be reintroduced in the House of Commons into the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill (LURB) given it has almost reached the end of its passage through parliament. Whilst nutrient neutrality is far from resolved, this decision supports nature-based solutions markets and gives confidence to the landowners exploring them.

More broadly, there is a strong case for nature-based solutions to help mitigate water quality issues irrespective of whether it is developers directly, a government scheme or sewage undertakers who are required to address them. Assuming the LURB gains Royal Assent, sewerage undertakers will have a new obligation to upgrade sewage treatment plants to the highest standard possible by 2030. A requirement for them to consider whether nature-based solutions could play a role in achieving this has been successfully added to the Bill.

Scotland: Programme for government

Scotland First Minister Humza Yousaf has set out his programme for government, accompanied by letters to each member of the cabinet setting out their priorities. These are the points with the strongest relevance to the rural sector, although none are new announcements:

- Introduce land reform legislation to further improve the transparency of land ownership, help ensure large-scale land holdings deliver in the public interest and empower communities by providing more opportunities to own land and have more say in how land in their area is used
- Create new crofting opportunities through the delivery of the National Development Plan for Crofting and reform the law, subject to the agreement of parliament, to support the future of crofting
- Confirmation that measures to reform Agricultural Holdings legislation will be in the Land Reform Bill and not the Agriculture Bill.

Scotland: Tackling the nature emergency

The Scottish government wants to accelerate nature restoration and is [consulting](#) on its plans. This covers the key areas of Scotland's overall Biodiversity Framework, including:

- Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy, published in December 2022
- The first five-year Delivery Plan to implement this strategy
- A set of principles to guide the delivery of key commitments to conserve 30% of land for nature by 2030
- Proposals for the upcoming Natural Environment Bill, including the statutory nature recovery targets
- Changes to National Parks legislation.

Environment & Natural Capital

River filled in and wetland created

4,000 tonnes of soil has been dumped into the River Aller in Somerset. Far from an environmental disaster, the move has been purposefully undertaken by the National Trust and the Environment Agency to restore the floodplain and create a seven-hectare area of wetland. The approach has been nicknamed a "ctrl alt delete" approach. As a result of the earth-dumping, a field recently grazed by sheep on the Holnicote Estate, with a man-made river channel several metres deep running along its boundary, has been transformed into a waterlogged wetland. It is also littered with 700 tonnes of deadwood logs, with the hope that wild beavers could eventually settle in the location. About 25,000 tree saplings have been planted among the newly formed ponds, as well as floodplain wildflower seeds. Plans to plant more tree saplings were halted after the elevated water table led to thousands of self-seeded trees and shrubs growing. The project has cost £650,000 and taken three years of planning but after only six weeks, 400 swallows have been seen feeding on the site and bat numbers have increased. The project was funded by the EU and the Environment Agency, as well as the Somerset Rivers Authority, the Green Recovery Challenge Fund and Frugi, an organic children's clothing company.

Global biodiversity fund launched

Representatives of 185 countries launched a new fund to ramp up investment to meet the goals of the Global Biodiversity Framework. Canada and the UK are the first nations to announce contributions to the fund, contributing \$146.8 million and \$12.58 million respectively. The fund intends to dedicate 20% of funds to support indigenous and local action to protect biodiversity and at least 36% of the fund's resources to support the most vulnerable people of the world.

Property & Development

Insulation scheme launched

The £1 billion Great British Insulation Scheme has been launched. Those eligible for support include families in council tax bands A-D in England or A-E in Scotland and Wales. Houses must also have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of D or below - an [online checker](#) can be used to confirm eligibility. To apply, households will need to provide household income details, any benefits being received and personal contact information. The scheme will support the installation of a wide range of types of insulation including cavity wall, loft, underfloor and solid floor insulation. It is expected to benefit around 300,000 homes and save households between £300 and £400 per year on their energy bills.

Gas hobs in need of correction

Swan and Comfee, have been added to the list of gas hobs that may require corrective action following an investigation by the Office for Product Safety and Standards. Eleven UK gas hob manufacturers have now committed to undertake a corrective action programme to make certain hobs safe. This followed several incidents,

including an explosion at a caravan park in April 2023. The companies will visit every home containing affected hobs and make them safe. All members of the public, including tenants and landlords, are being encouraged to check if they are affected – further information is available [here](#).

Business & Economy

No new offshore wind for the foreseeable future

No new offshore wind projects were secured at the government's latest Contracts for Difference auction. Last year, offshore wind, onshore wind and solar energy projects collectively contributed to nearly 29% of the UK's electricity generation. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero said the absence of awards was a result of the global rise in inflation and the impact on supply chains. The auction process used has however been criticised, particularly because the government decided to reduce the offshore wind cap price from £46/MWh to £44/MWh (in 2012 prices), to continue the downward trend in renewable energy prices.

However, prospects for onshore wind power in England have improved - the National Planning Policy Framework has been revised to remove the effective ban that was introduced by David Cameron's government in 2015. The new wording means local community concerns must be "appropriately" addressed rather than "fully addressed" in the planning process. As a result, a single objection can no longer stall the entire process. The government says this will ensure the whole community has a say, not just a small number of objectors. Communities will also be able to bring forward proposals for onshore wind and it is proposed that those backing local wind farms could benefit from cheaper energy. For more information see this [blog](#).

Europe's largest solar farm to be built on a former landfill site has started generating electricity. The Ockendon solar farm is the third largest solar farm in the UK, with more than 100,000 solar modules over 70 hectares of land. The site, being a former landfill site, had limited options for alternative development. The project opens up the possibility of more of the UK's closed landfill sites being used for solar power. If you would like to discuss renewable energy projects please contact [Henry Grant](#).

Other Rural News

And finally... Dogs perform Mozart's symphony

Performing the complexities of a Mozart symphony would surely be limited to the intellectual capacities of humans alone. Seemingly not. A classical music festival in Copenhagen, Denmark, opened with some canine additions to the orchestra performing the Hunting Symphony. The symphony is a lesser-known piece by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's father, Leopold. Chief conductor Adam Fischer auditioned dozens of dogs for the role and said he was honouring the composer's wish that a part of the symphony should be accompanied by baying hounds. Cookie, Sophus and Sica were chosen for their barking skills, and went through three months of training, not only to bark on command but to remain quiet for the rest of the performance.

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