

Food & Farming

Abstraction licence deadline approaches

Farmers who abstract more than 20 cubic metres a day for a previously exempt activity such as trickle irrigation, hydroponics and other forms of horticultural irrigation, have until 31 December 2019 to apply for an abstraction licence. The Environment Agency or Natural Resources Wales will make a decision on the application by 31 December 2022 and applicants can continue abstracting during this time. The rules also apply to abstractions that support sites of special scientific interest, water level management plans, Environmental Stewardship sites, water meadows and managed wetlands. If you would like to discuss abstraction licencing please contact [Peter Bennett](#).

Agri-tech: Helping UK farmers lead the way

Farmers have access to an unprecedented number of high-tech tools but still risk being left behind according to a [report](#) by NFU Mutual which says “technology could be the saviour of family farms”. The key obstacle to overcome is slow adoption of the technology due to “a lack of understanding... capital required, and concerns about the reliability of first-generation technology”. Tim Price, Rural Affairs Specialist at NFU Mutual says “I am now meeting a worrying number of farmers who have put off making decisions on investing in technology”. He believes farmers face a difficult choice; “making massive investments or being left by the wayside”.

Flooding support

Defra has extended its Farming Recovery Fund to support farmers affected by flooding across Yorkshire and the Midlands. It provides grants of between £500 and £25,000 to cover uninsurable repair costs such as clearing debris or recovering damaged land. Those affected have until March 2020 to submit [applications](#). Despite the support, the Government has faced criticism for its slow response to the crisis.

The NFU say the “wet weather exposes the vulnerability of farming businesses” and has urged Defra and associated agencies to take a common-sense approach to managing the effects of unusually wet weather and flooding. The country has seen rainfall levels 98% higher than last year, causing severe delays to winter drilling and leaving some farmers unable to finish harvesting. The NFU has asked the RPA to ensure affected farmers receive their BPS payments as early as possible and to consider this weather event as a ‘force majeure’ for farmers in agri-environment schemes. It is also trying to gain leniency on the three crop rule.

BPS values and rates confirmed

The RPA has now published the BPS [entitlement values and greening rates](#). Lowland and non-moorland rates have increased by approximately 0.7% compared to 2018; whilst moorland rates have increased by 1.4%.

Policy

Election: campaign commitments emerge

Conservative Party

The Conservative Party has announced plans for a £640 million Nature for Climate fund to boost tree planting. It plans to work with the devolved administrations to boost the UK tree-planting rate to 30,000 hectares a year. The party says this could mean 30 million more trees, which would be in line with recommendations from the independent Committee on Climate Change. The fund would also help to restore degraded peatland.

In addition to the environment, the Conservative campaign has focused on support for towns and communities across Britain. The Prime Minister has pledged that a Conservative government would strengthen the rights of community groups to acquire assets like pubs and post offices. They would be able to pause a sale for nine months whilst they prepare a bid, assisted by a £150 million fund which would co-fund some purchases. They will also help “left-behind” towns by offering reduced business rates.

Speaking on BBC Breakfast last Friday, Boris Johnson said that he would “get Brexit done by January” and that Brexit would “turbo charge” the economy. He said the UK would have “bags of time” to get a new EU UK trade deal in place by the end of 2020.

Labour Party

The Labour Party manifesto is expected to be launched on 21 November and has been described as “more radical” than its 2017 manifesto. So far during the campaign, Labour has promised a “green industrial revolution” as part of a Green New Deal. The Green New Deal contained a net zero target of 2030 but this has since been softened following pushback from its trade union backers who were concerned about the impact on jobs. The party will now target net zero ‘well before 2050’ and has also promised to make all new-build homes zero carbon within three years.

The shadow chancellor has watered down his plan to give tenants a “right to buy” in the private rented sector. He first pitched the idea in an interview with the Financial Times during September, but it was criticised due to the expectation landlords would sell at a discount. He has now said it would not apply to landlords who own only “one or two” rental properties. This leaves open the possibility of estate villages being affected if it becomes a manifesto commitment.

Labour has promised free full fibre broadband for all by 2030, which it would achieve by nationalising BT Openreach and spending £20 billion installing a fully comprehensive national full fibre broadband network. Its running costs would be funded from a tax on the tech giants, and it pledged to start with the worst areas first. BT has said the plan could cost more than £100 billion, whilst the CLA has warned the plan risks delaying broadband improvements in rural areas due to the time it would take to nationalise BT Openreach. The Conservative’s previously pledged £5 billion to bring full fibre to every home by 2025.

Liberal Democrats

In an election campaign that has arguably seen more focus on environmental issues than any before it, the Liberal Democrat party has pledged £100 billion over five years towards tackling the effects of climate change and protecting the environment. This includes a plan to plant 60 million trees a year across the UK by 2025, which it describes as around 40,000 hectares, assuming a higher planting density than the Conservative party did in its figures. The Liberal Democrats ambition is to increase UK forestry cover by one million hectares by 2045. The party has also committed to create a £5 billion flood prevention and adaptation fund and to increase Defra’s budget by £1 billion per year to ensure that non-departmental bodies like the Environment Agency receive more funding.

Countryside bodies release manifestos

The [Campaign to Protect Rural England \(CPRE\)](#), [Sustain](#), [NFU](#) and [Greener UK](#) are just some of the countryside bodies who have released manifestos in a bid to make sustainable rural practices part of the election debate. Some proposals include:

- Commitments to reach net zero emissions (CPRE, NFU and Sustain)
- Specific investment in the rural economy (CPRE)
- Require and protect food safety, standards and clear labelling (Sustain, NFU)
- Secure the UK’s global climate leadership (Greener UK)
- A move towards sustainable farming (Sustain, NFU and Greener UK)

The CLA has launched its Rural Powerhouse campaign and has written to every parliamentary candidate, urging them to support it. The campaign argues that closing the rural productivity gap will add £43 billion to the UK’s economy each year. To achieve this connectivity needs to be improved, the planning system revamped, farming needs to become profitable and sustainable, a simpler tax regime introduced and more investment made in skills and innovation.

Trading partners ask for Brexit compensation

Fifteen countries including Australia, New Zealand the US and India have been setting out Brexit concerns at the World Trade Organisation. Some are seeking compensation from the UK and EU. Their complaints include that the successive delays to Brexit have harmed their exports because companies cannot send goods when they are unsure about the tariffs which would be applied when they arrive in the UK. However their main concern is the apportionment of Tariff Rate Quotas which allow specific quantities of eligible goods to be imported into the EU at zero or reduced tariff rates. The EU and UK have proposed different ways of splitting them up, and the countries are also concerned that the division will reduce flexibility because any capacity which is unused by the UK will be wasted rather than available for use by another EU Member State as it would be currently.

Government ends support for fracking

Tremors associated with fracking cannot be accurately predicted with current technology according to [a report](#) from the Oil and Gas Authority. This has led the Government to end its support for fracking in England with immediate

effect, until technology improves. Some opposition MPs have criticised the move as a stunt to win votes in the upcoming election because it is not a permanent ban.

Wales: Proposals lack balance

A single scheme encouraging sustainable farming practices is planned to support Welsh farmers in future. Rural Affairs Minister, Lesley Griffiths, told the NFU Cymru annual conference that farmers would now have the chance to co-design it. However farmers questioned whether the single scheme ambition was realistic after encountering difficulties with Rural Payments Wales over contractual issues with their Glastir agreements. Ms Griffiths offered reassurance that the number of advisors available would reflect demand. The Tenant Farmers Association in Wales has criticised the policy proposals, warning that they are “too slanted towards environmental objectives and have insufficient content around building farm business resilience”.

Environment & Natural Capital

We need you to plant trees now

In an unusual move, the Government has released a statement to reassure landowners about woodland creation and encourage them to plant trees without delay. “There is no need for concern about how woodland created now will be treated under Environmental Land Management (ELM) in the future and certainly no reason to delay tree planting. To respond to the climate emergency, we need you to plant trees now.” Defra Minister Zac Goldsmith reiterated that the current grants which include the Woodland Creation Grant, Woodland Carbon Fund, and Woodland Carbon Guarantee present an attractive offer, and he said “there’s nothing to be gained by waiting to see what ELM will do for woodland creation”. The Government has guaranteed no-one in a Countryside Stewardship agreement will be unfairly disadvantaged when England transitions to new arrangements under ELMS and has promised a smooth transition. If you would like to discuss woodland creation opportunities please contact [Marc Liebrecht](#).

UK set to miss targets

The UK will fail to meet a range of environmental targets in the early 2020s according to analysis by Unearthed and the Financial Times. Many of the targets are legally binding EU commitments, but there is uncertainty over the future of the UK’s environmental regulation in relation to enforceability and divergence from current standards. The UK has breached EU targets on nitrogen dioxide concentrations repeatedly and has been held to account for it in the courts. While it is meeting commitments for three of the pollutants named in the EU’s National Emissions Ceiling Directive, it fails when it comes to ammonia and particulate matter (PM2.5). A study in the Epidemiology journal recently linked inhalation of particulate matter to brain tumours. The UK has met its 2020 target to generate 30% of its electricity from renewable sources, but will miss a target to produce 15% of its overall energy requirement from renewables unless the current rate of progress is doubled.

Trucks to run on cow manure

200 new vans powered by biomethane will be added to the John Lewis and Waitrose fleet over the next 18 months, as part of the retailer’s plans to cut its emissions. The retailer already has 80 vans running on biomethane produced from food waste which cuts emissions by 85% compared to diesel. Its fleet will be switched to biomethane from slurry instead. This fuel source is considered completely carbon neutral due to it stopping methane being released into the atmosphere.

Property & Development

Scotland: Rural planning to be prioritised

The Scottish Government is [considering](#) removing the need for planning permission for certain types of rural developments to help tackle depopulation and support local economies. In future small scale developments such as the conversion of agricultural buildings to deliver more homes in rural areas could be possible under expanded permitted development rights. Removal of planning permission for larger operational farm buildings including sheds and polytunnels is also being considered, along with developments that help address climate change.

Cornish smart grid trial

Homes and businesses in Cornwall have been selling electricity to their local energy network. It was the first time that traditional energy users have acted as suppliers in a microcosm of a full energy system. The trial involved 100 Cornish homes being fitted with batteries and solar panels to act as miniaturised power stations. 150 local businesses who were prepared to adjust their energy use based on the supply and demand also participated. If power output dropped, the businesses were financially rewarded by the National Grid for using less energy. If the local grid had more energy than it needed, the companies could increase their energy demand.

General binding rules: Small sewage discharges

The General Binding Rules, introduced in 2015, required residential property owners with a septic tank which discharges to a watercourse, to either connect to a mains sewer, install a drainage field or replace the septic tank with a package sewage treatment plant by 1 January 2020. The Environment Agency's (EA) [guidance](#) has been updated recently and now says "you must have plans in place to carry out this work within a reasonable timescale, typically 12 months". It also clarifies that an EA permit is necessary in order to use a septic tank conversion unit or a reedbed for discharging effluent to a watercourse. This allows the EA to assess the risk of using this sort of system in your location and it will be necessary to show that it will treat your sewage to an appropriate standard. Those who have a [septic tank which drains to a soakaway](#), well or borehole also need to take action; they must either upgrade to a drainage field or apply for a permit so that the EA can assess the risk. If you would like advice please contact [Richard Vincent](#).

Minerals site dewatering deadline

Abstraction licence reform also affects the minerals industry. Dewatering mines and quarries was previously an exempt activity, but operators have until 31 December 2019 to apply for a transfer and/or abstraction licence. If an application is not made the dewatering activity must stop. The Environment Agency or Natural Resources Wales will make a decision on the application by 31 December 2022 and applicants can continue dewatering during this time. If you would like to discuss dewatering licences please contact [John Dutson](#).

Business & Economy

Scotland: Tourism fund opens

Scotland's rural tourist sites are being encouraged to apply for a share of a £3 million fund. The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund aims to help sites meet the demand of growing visitor numbers. Some outcomes from the first two funding rounds include 11.36 kilometres of paths, three access bridges, 13 new toilet facilities and 1,030 car parking spaces. Only local authorities and national park authorities can apply, however they can do so in partnership with Community Groups and other agencies. For further details click [here](#).

Other Rural News

And finally...

Holy Grail of apples

A multi-million dollar marketing campaign for a new apple with no touchscreen or camera? Yes, really. The Cosmic Crisp is set to become the new global bestseller after being described as the holy grail of apple varieties. Juicy yet sweet and crisp at the same time, the apple is the result of a breeding programme that began in 1997 at Washington State University's department of horticulture. Now it is at the centre of a \$10 million launch. Not to be left behind, Britain has launched a rival to the Pink Lady. The Flanders Pink will be the first pink-skinned apple grown on a commercial scale in the UK.

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

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