

Food & Farming

Brexit compensation for Irish farmers

Irish beef farmers will receive a share of £86 million to compensate for significant losses which they have experienced since the EU referendum, due to the weakness in sterling cutting their prime cattle prices. The aid package has been signed off by Brussels and will be distributed in the coming months. Half of the sum will be provided by the EU and the remainder from national funds. Payment criteria or rates have not yet been set. The leader of the Irish Farmers Association has previously suggested targeted support of £86 a head for finished animals and £172 a head per suckler cow should be paid. Farmers in Northern Ireland are concerned about the aid: Ulster Farmers Union deputy president David Brown said “uncertainty around Brexit is causing difficulties, which is why it is crucial we leave the EU with a deal that delivers for agriculture”.

Gene-edited pigs to be commercialised in China?

A Chinese company will seek regulatory approval to commercialise gene-edited pigs in China, which has the world's largest pork market. The pigs are resistant to Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS), also known as blue-ear disease. Genus, a British livestock genetics firm, agreed to license the technology to Beijing Capital Agribusiness Co Ltd (BCA) because foreign firms cannot develop biotechnology in China. China currently has no regulatory framework for gene-edited animals or any genetically modified food crops, meaning BCA will need to lobby the Government to create a regulatory framework.

Genus will receive \$20 million upfront from the deal and between \$120 million and \$160 million for the joint venture with BCA if it obtains regulatory approval. Genus will also receive royalties on the sale of PRRS resistant pigs in China. Genus is also seeking approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to commercialise the technology in America too. PRRS is estimated to cost the European and US industry around \$2.5 billion per year in revenue. Genus and BCA also plan to work in partnership to develop resistance against African swine fever which is expected to reduce the Chinese herd by up to 200 million pigs.

Future of food: Battered banana blossom and jellyfish chips

By 2169, personal microchips, neural laces and implants could all work to give us our exact nutritional requirements. [A study](#) by Sainsbury's set out a long term vision for the future. In 2025, it predicts a move towards environmental foot printing apps, vertical farming and alternative foods like algae milk and insects. Banana blossom could be sold as a plant-based alternative to fish. By 2050, diets are predicted to have diversified even further to include jellyfish, seaweed and cultured meat. Transparency will also be more important to consumers, with wider adoption of blockchain technology and traceability measures. The study goes on to imagine 2169 as a “renaissance of planet Earth” with “personalised optimisation” of diets and “farming impossible environments” through desert greening and desalination.

Irrigation prospects reviewed

The irrigation prospects of Eastern England have been downgraded by the Environment Agency due to adverse weather conditions. East Anglia, Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire are now all classed as poor. “Significant restrictions on abstraction from surface and groundwater are probable” in those areas according to the [review](#). Rainfall is already less than 50% of the long term average in all regions except the South West. Predictions show that drier conditions are marginally more likely between May and June. Temperatures are also more likely to be above average.

Policy

General licence chaos

In the absence of workable general licences, Natural England has issued over 850 individual licences to permit the lethal control of certain bird species. Staff from the Environment Agency and Natural England have been redeployed to deal with general licence enquiries and staff from the wider Defra group may also be called upon to help with processing applications and enquiries.

Defra's call for evidence on the impact of Natural England's decision to revoke the general licences received over 4,000 responses. The Department has been reviewing the evidence submitted and is due to announce its intended course of action during week commencing 20th May.

Increased protection for hares considered

A Victorian law protecting hares is "no longer effective" and "no longer enforced" because it restricts when hare meat can be sold rather than when hares can be shot. Former agricultural minister George Eustice has proposed new hare preservation measures. According to Mr Eustice, brown hare numbers have fallen from four million in the late 19th century to just 800,000 today. The Government estimates that over 300,000 hares are shot each year in the UK; illegal hare coursing and diseases like the rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus add to their plight.

Against this backdrop Mr Eustice argues "it is essential that we act now to reduce the mortality of our hare population and to afford our hares the protection they deserve". He proposes a modern-day close season prohibiting the killing or taking of hares during the breeding season in England and Wales; similar legislation is already in place in Scotland, Northern Ireland and many other European nations. The MP suggested the closed season should run between the beginning of February and the end of July but is open to discussion about the most appropriate window. He was also open to making provision for licensed culling in certain circumstances.

Defra hires academics for post-Brexit policy

Defra has hired six academics to strengthen ties between researchers and the Government. Their work will tackle the most pressing environmental and food issues and shape post-Brexit policy. Five will focus on rural land use, food, air quality, marine resources and waste whilst the sixth will make sure connections between the areas are identified and considered. Professor Ian Boyd, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser has said the approach is "breaking new ground" and will deliver "innovative, evidence-based solutions for the future".

Environment & Natural Capital

Humans threaten one million species with extinction

Nature "is declining faster than at any time in human history" according to the UN. [The report](#) suggests this means one million species already face extinction due to human actions. The drivers of these changes have accelerated in the past 50 years, with land and sea use change having the largest direct impact. 76% of the land surface has been significantly altered, 66% of the ocean area is experiencing cumulative impacts and 85% of wetlands have been lost. Climate change was also singled out as a factor that is "exacerbating the impact of other drivers on nature and human well-being".

The report concludes that "nature can be conserved, restored and used sustainably while simultaneously meeting other global societal goals". But current goals for conservation and sustainability "cannot be met by current trajectories". Instead "urgent and concerted efforts" will be needed to achieve "transformative changes". The head of UNESCO said "no one will be able to claim that they did not know". "We can no longer continue to destroy the diversity of life. This is our responsibility towards future generations."

25 Year Environmental Plan reviewed

90% of the 25 Year Environmental Plan's actions have already been delivered or are being progressed a [Government review](#) says. This includes:

- Reducing plastic waste
- Presenting the Agriculture Bill to Parliament
- Beginning the creation of a Northern forest
- Enhancing National Parks and AONBs

Of the Government's 37 priority actions, four are complete, 29 are in progress and on schedule and four are in progress but delayed. An [outcome indicator framework](#) was released alongside the review to monitor for environmental improvements. 66 indicators have been arranged into 10 themes including air, wildlife and resilience; data is available for 27 whilst the rest are in development.

Scotland: An opportunity for anaerobic digestion

Anaerobic digestion is presently the most environmentally effective method used for treating food waste in Scotland according to the Scottish Government's and Zero Waste Scotland's [Food Waste Reduction Action Plan \(FWRAP\)](#). Alongside measures to reduce waste, there is an opportunity for Scottish farmers to develop anaerobic digestion facilities. In 2014, Scottish households threw away around 600,000 tonnes of food and drink waste. A future option for treating food waste could be 'Black Soldier Fly treatment'; the larvae consume organic waste and are then

converted into salmon feed. Salmon farming is Scotland's second biggest food export and so the plan could deliver economic benefits as well as environmental.

Property & Development

Fund for discounted homes

Volunteer groups can apply for up to £50,000 to help identify suitable sites for discounted homes, get planning permission and other technical support. £8.5 million has been made available for the three year pilot on top of £26 million which was announced last year to help develop neighbourhood plans. Kit Malthouse, Housing Minister, said "supporting volunteers who are passionate about building more of the homes we need in their communities is something I'm fully behind, and I want to see far more people getting involved across England". Funds can be applied for through the Government's support provider [Locality](#).

Business & Economy

Tree losses will damage the economy

Ash dieback will cost the UK £7 billion over the next 10 years and nearly £15 billion over the next 100 years. The biggest impact will be the loss of benefits that woods and trees provide, such as clean air and water and storing carbon dioxide. The disease could also create some significant local issues; for example the researchers estimate Devon County Council will need to spend more than £30 million a year on managing roadside ash trees. The study was carried out by researchers at the University of Oxford, Fera Science, Sylva Foundation and the Woodland Trust. They have called for a nationwide replanting scheme, which could restore the benefits and reduce the cost of ash dieback by £2.5 billion. They also warn a greater focus on biosecurity and sourcing of safe plant material is needed to keep new diseases out.

Other Rural News

New approach to flood and coastal resilience

Environment Agency Chair, Emma Howard Boyd has launched a major [long-term strategy](#) to tackle flooding and coastal change. The strategy references the Government's 'Health and Harmony' policy statement which encourages farmers and land managers who wish to improve the environment to enter into environmental land management contracts, an objective of which is to prevent, reduce and adapt to climate change and other environmental hazards like flooding. From 2021 the Environment Agency plans to work with farmers, landowners and others to identify opportunities for using agricultural practices (through funding, advice and regulation) to manage flooding and coastal change. The strategy also includes:

- A commitment to work with partners to develop consistent standards for flood and coastal resilience across the country
- A call for all infrastructure to be flood resilient by 2050
- A projection that in addition to resilience measures, an average of £1 billion will need to be invested each year in traditional flood and coastal defences and natural flood management
- An objective to encourage property owners to 'build back better' after a flood and in some cases move away from risk and rebuild in better places.

A [consultation](#) on the draft strategy is open until 4 July.

Food, art and edible tickets

"FOOD: Bigger than the Plate" has opened its doors at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London with the first 200 visitors being treated to tickets made from icing sugar. The exhibition hopes to encourage visitors to think about how the collective choices they make can lead to a more sustainable and fair food future. There are 70 projects split into four sections; compost, farming, trading and eating. Pieces include cheese made from celebrity's bacteria and urban mushrooms grown from coffee grounds taken from the V&A café. Co-curators Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan said "food is one of the most powerful tools through which we shape the world we live in, from how we create society, culture and pleasure to how we determine our relationship with the natural world".

And finally...

Growing vegetables in the most northerly town on Earth

The Arctic's Svalbard Islands have the highest CO₂ emissions per capita in the world. Air freight is relied upon heavily and most food arrives in plastic packaging. A determination to cut carbon emissions led farmer Ben Vidmar to take on the challenge of growing vegetables and baby leaves in Longyearbyen, the most northerly town on earth.

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Landscape | Issues shaping the future of rural estates, agriculture and land management

savills

The islands have no daylight for three months each year, so in the light season he uses a dome greenhouse and in dark season he grows his crops entirely indoors.

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