

Food & Farming

Harvest 2024 comes to an end

The AHDB has confirmed the UK's 2024 grain and oilseeds harvest is complete. According to its Harvest Progress Report, spring crops fared much better than winter crops, which faced some of the wettest conditions on record. Wheat yields are estimated to be down 7% on average across the UK, with the protein content of milling wheat also lower than average. Ergot has been particularly prevalent in wheat samples. Barley yields are also down 3%, but germination scores are good and nitrogen levels are low. Oilseed rape oil levels were typically high, but yields have been variable due to high cabbage stem flea beetle pressure when the crop was established.

The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit believes farmers could lose £600 million in revenue for harvest 2024 on five key crops (wheat, winter and spring barley, oats and oilseed rape) due to the adverse weather conditions. Record rainfall in September means autumn drilling will not be possible in some areas for the second year in a row. Climate change has been blamed for the ongoing conditions.

New [research](#) from the Institute of Public Policy Research warns climate tipping points could wipe out domestic crop growing in the UK. A climate tipping point is a critical threshold that, when crossed, leads to large, accelerating and potentially irreversible changes in the climate system. Tipping points in the Atlantic Ocean pose particular threats to the UK. For example, the report says there is a 45% chance of ocean currents (such as the Gulf Stream) collapsing this century, leading to seismic changes to the UK's weather. The report says such tipping points are a blind spot, and the government should undertake a rapid national security risk assessment of climate change to identify the most critical threats and develop options to manage the risks better.

Progress made in Scottish landlord-tenant relations

A report published by Scotland's Tenant Farming Commissioner (TFC) reports significant progress has been made in improving industry standards. The report is informed by research from 2018, which surveyed over 1,000 participants. It revealed 17% of landlords and tenants were dissatisfied with agent conduct. In response, the TFC issued key recommendations to improve practices, which were in line with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016. The latest review, informed by 16 in-depth interviews, found a high level of awareness and adherence to the TFC's guidance across the sector and a proactive approach by agents to improving industry standards. This included interpersonal skills training and feedback loops highlighting learning points from challenging cases. Given the small sample size, the findings are considered to be indicative rather than absolute. The [report](#) also notes that poor practice still exists and challenges remain. Increased costs and stretched resources have been a concern, particularly for smaller organisations. A follow-up assessment in five years has been recommended to ensure sustained progress.

Half of world food production is at risk

Over half the world's food production is at risk of failure within 25 years. A [report](#) from the Global Commission on the Economics of Water says that demand for freshwater will outstrip supply by 40% by the end of the decade. It concludes urgent action is needed to conserve water and preserve the ecosystems on which our freshwater depends.

A new report by Savills Rural Research agrees action is needed to build resilience around water in the rural sector. The [Spotlight on Water](#) reports that the UK alone will need over five billion extra litres per day by 2050. The rural sector can drive solutions based on water reduction, reuse and recycling using technology, nature-based solutions and infrastructure. Businesses must initiate the journey to resilience as soon as possible by building a plan for the future, undertaking a water audit and reducing reliance on stressed water sources.

Policy

"No more to give" for flood protection

At a Defra Flood Action Week event, Caroline Douglass, Executive Director for Flood and Coastal Risk Management at the Environment Agency (EA), said the EA was "doing its best" with its flood defence budget. She

said the agency “would always love to have more” funding, but she appreciated the country didn’t “necessarily have more to give”.

The event took place a year after Storm Babet, which resulted in 2,150 properties being flooded, 10,000 people being evacuated and the loss of seven lives. With the ongoing impact of climate change, events like Storm Babet are expected to occur more frequently. Last month, nearly a thousand properties were flooded due to heavy rain. Ms Douglass emphasised how important it is for those living in flood-prone areas to be prepared. She encouraged people to take small steps, such as signing up for flood warnings and checking if they are in a high-risk area to mitigate the impact of flooding.

Defra has recently been criticised for its slow distribution of Farming Recovery Fund grants in response to Storm Henk. The funding was announced in January and expanded in May, but many affected farmers have yet to receive anything.

Red tape and stability are key themes of the international investment summit

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's pitch to international investors emphasised a shared commitment to growth. His “Pitch for Britain” positioned the UK as an ideal destination for investment and business expansion, focusing on four key themes: stability, strategy, regulation, and a commitment to enhancing Britain's global position.

The speech primarily aimed to encourage investors to support Britain financially; however, it also resonated with the rural sector. Defra has repeatedly assured that its “new deal for farmers” will “restore stability and confidence” and confirmed there will be no changes to the Environmental Land Management schemes. Kier Starmer echoed this sentiment, stating that his government would move away from the “chop and change culture” of politics to foster stability.

Regarding ‘red tape’, the speech hinted the government wants to cut a lot of it, saying that regulation was “needlessly holding back the investment the country needs”, “stopping [the country] building homes” and slowing down infrastructure projects. Part of an effort to remove these bureaucratic hurdles is the recent consultation on the national planning policy framework, which aims to speed up development.

Defra to undergo regulatory review

An internal review of Defra's regulators and regulations will be conducted. It will focus on whether Defra's regulatory bodies (which include the Environment Agency and the Office for Environmental Protection) are equipped to secure private sector investment, drive growth and protect the environment. The report will assess stakeholder and customer satisfaction surrounding Defra's regulation, determine how efficient the current regulatory landscape is and ensure that regulation drives economic growth while protecting the environment.

Dan Corry, who previously led the Number 10 policy unit under Gordon Brown, will conduct the review. The ambition is to transform Defra into a “key economic growth department”. Defra aims for the review to increase private sector investment in the water sector, develop circular economies, find solutions to build more homes and infrastructure, improve flood resilience, and drive rural economic growth by improving the way regulators work.

Environment & Natural Capital

State of Natural Capital Report

Natural England has launched its first “State of Natural Capital” report, outlining that England's ecosystems are at risk, but there are many opportunities for landowners and public and private bodies to take action to restore them. It lists ecosystems as “assets” and explains that, like any asset, if they become degraded they will not function well and will become unable to deliver the services they provide. The report highlights several vital services natural capital can provide: economic resilience, net zero, climate adaption, food security, health and wellbeing, and water security. Speaking about the report, Tony Juniper, chair of Natural England, said “nature is our national wealth service: our natural assets provide a steady stream of essential goods and benefits on which our economy and our population rely. If we look after nature, nature will look after us”. Our [blog](#) analyses the report in more detail and considers the key takeaways.

Atlantic salmon stocks are the lowest in history

This year, 5,399 Atlantic salmon were recorded in England, compared to 20,000 fish annually until 2017. This figure is the lowest level in recorded history and illustrates a steep decline in salmon numbers in England. Atlantic salmon in Wales are experiencing a similar decline, with 2023 being the lowest catch year since recording began in the 1970's. It is thought that the decline can be attributed to increasing water pollution and river infrastructure,

such as weirs and locks, which prevent them from travelling upstream. Atlantic salmon were upgraded to “endangered” status last year, meaning it is illegal to sell wild salmon caught by rod or net. Despite the more robust protection, numbers continue to decline, which suggests environmental conditions are the issue. The Atlantic salmon is now in danger of becoming extinct. Although sewage discharges in the water sector have slightly reduced since last year, levels are still high and must be reduced further to improve the chances of Atlantic salmon populations recovering.

Property & Development

Funding for long-term energy storage

A new long-duration energy storage (LDES) support scheme will go live in 2025. LDES technologies allow energy from renewable electricity generation to be stored for weeks, months or even years. When required, these technologies can usually provide energy for long periods too. Examples include pumped storage hydro, which stores electricity by pumping water up to a reservoir when excess electricity is available. When energy demand exceeds supply, the water can be released to generate energy. Such technologies are essential to smooth out supply in energy grids with significant exposure to renewable energy generation. Great Britain currently has 2.8 GW of LDES across four existing pumped storage hydro schemes in Scotland and Wales.

To encourage new LDES projects, Ofgem, the UK’s energy regulator, will deliver the first round of a cap-and-floor mechanism. A cap-and-floor scheme would provide a guaranteed minimum income for developers in return for accepting a revenue limit. A similar cap-and-floor scheme is used for electricity interconnectors, which connect Great Britain’s grid with other countries. The scheme will be split into two strands; one focusing on mature technologies and another dedicated to innovation.

Wales: lease your property to a local authority

In Wales, landlords can lease their properties to a local authority for between five and 20 years to help it increase its social housing stock. The government is promoting Leasing Scheme Wales, which provides a guaranteed monthly rental income. Properties may also be eligible for grant funding of up to £25,000 for renovations and up to £5,000 for energy efficiency improvements.

Business & Economy

Mineral markets update

The Mineral Products Association has released the [latest edition](#) of its “Regional overview of construction and mineral products markets in Great Britain”. According to the report, the construction supply chain has been dogged by cost inflation, economic uncertainty and planning obstacles. High interest rates and contracting household income have led to low buyer demand for new housing, which accounts for over a fifth of primary aggregate demand. As a result, mineral product sales were pushed towards a third consecutive year of decline in 2024. In contrast, infrastructure work has remained resilient. The construction industry is also anticipating a recovery into 2025, which will, in turn, boost the demand for materials. For more information on minerals, contact [Stuart Jeffries](#).

Other Rural News

The white wilderness of the Antarctic is getting greener

Parts of the Antarctic are going green at a rapid rate. Scientists used satellite imagery to analyse vegetation on the Antarctic Peninsula, an area warming much faster than global averages. Plant life has increased more than 10-fold in only four decades. The study by the universities of Exeter and Hertfordshire and the British Antarctic Survey found vegetation covers almost five square miles, up massively from 0.4 square miles in 1986. The greening rate has also accelerated by 30% between 2016 and 2021. The findings come after parts of the continent experienced a record-breaking heat wave, with regions hitting 10°C above normal in July 2024.

And finally... Artwork accidentally thrown away

A member of staff at a Dutch gallery threw two beer tins away. Despite appearing unremarkable, the act inspired a temporary panic in the gallery’s curator, who, returning from a short break, noticed one of the artworks had gone missing. The two beer cans were a piece of art by French artist Alexandre Lavet entitled “All The Good Times We Spent Together”. Curator Elisah van den Bergh salvaged the scrapped sculpture from a bin moments before it was thrown out. She stressed there were “no hard feelings” towards the mechanic, who had just started at the museum and “was just doing his job”. It’s not the first disaster to befall a piece of modern art. In 2023, a man ate a

banana that had been taped to a wall as part of an installation at a gallery in Seoul. In 2011, a cleaner mistook a piece of modern art worth £690,000 for an eyesore that needed a good scrub with a scouring pad.

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