

## Food & Farming

### Grants for flooded farmers

The government has responded to industry calls for support to help farmers recover from the impact of flooding due to Storm Henk. Farmers with eligible land will be offered a Farming Recovery Fund grant of between £500 and £25,000 to help cover the costs of reinstating land to its condition before it flooded. The fund has already been revised to remove a stipulation that the land must be within 150 metres of an eligible river. However, farmers have highlighted other instances of significant damage which still fall outside the scheme's eligibility criteria.

As it stands, farmers will be able to receive payments for all agricultural land parcels which are flooded and contiguous to a river that had notably high river level gauge readings during the storm. The eligible rivers are in nine English council areas - these are Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Somerset, Warwickshire, West Northamptonshire, Wiltshire and Worcestershire. Additional counties are under review. The Rural Payments Agency will contact farmers to advise them of their eligibility for support, which is calculated at a rate of £130 per hectare.

Farm businesses and residences in these areas can access additional grants through the Flood Recovery Framework. A Business Recovery Grant of up to £2,500 is available for eligible small and medium-sized businesses impacted by the flooding, this includes farms. Up to £5,000 is available to eligible flood-hit property owners to help make their homes and businesses more resilient to future flooding under the Property Flood Resilience Repair Grant. Business rate relief is also on offer. Businesses and property owners should apply to their local authority to access that support.

### Practical changes to hemp licensing

More practical licences for growing industrial hemp will be offered by the Home Office from the 2025 growing season. The licensing process has been criticised as a barrier to wider cropping of industrial hemp. To address this the Home Office will offer licences of up to six years in duration rather than the current three years. There will be also the option of requesting a deferred start date of up to a year so that growers can prepare and have more certainty. The new licence will allow industrial hemp to be grown anywhere on a licensed farm. Industrial hemp is used for fibre and seed production with end users in the textile and construction industries. There were 136 farmers growing hemp in 2023 compared to six a decade ago.

## Policy

### Environment Agency's new methane plan

A new Methane Action Plan sets out the Environment Agency's (EA) main priorities for tackling the greenhouse gas (GHG) between 2024 and 2026. It has three main objectives:

- Improve how methane is measured, monitored, reported and modelled
- Maximise the effectiveness of regulation to reduce and prevent emissions
- Work with external partners to share knowledge to improve collective understanding.

The EA plans to work with sectors not currently regulated for methane emissions but are big emitters, including agriculture. It said it will encourage these unregulated industries to lower their emissions through voluntary schemes such as industry codes of practice and encourage innovation in areas such as methane capture on farms. A standard rules permit to regulate methane capture from slurry stores will be published. Methane represented 14% of total UK GHG emissions in 2022, with agriculture responsible for nearly half of these emissions.

### New net zero minister

Following the resignation of Graham Stuart, Justin Tomlinson has been appointed Minister of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Mr Tomlinson is the 11<sup>th</sup> person to take on the brief within the last 10 years. He was first elected as an MP for North Swindon in 2010 and was a minister at the Department for Work and Pensions from April 2019 to September 2021. Mr Tomlinson previously welcomed the news that the government had enshrined

the net zero target by 2050 into law. He has also rebelled against the government's zero emission vehicle mandate, saying he was worried about the availability of EV charge points. In the last two readings of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, the incoming energy minister has voted in favour of the proposed law which seeks to add new tests to annual oil and gas licensing rounds.

### **Licences for gamebird releases were unlawful**

Defra has conceded a claim that licences granted for the release of gamebirds in two protected areas were illegal. The release of pheasants and red-legged partridges was permitted near the Deben Estuary, Suffolk, and at Breckland, Norfolk, both of which are Special Protection Areas (SPAs). The decision by then-environment secretary, Thérèse Coffey, and Defra minister Lord Richard Benyon went against Natural England's advice to not grant game licences in and around the SPAs in order to protect rare wild birds from the spread of bird flu. Following a legal challenge by Wild Justice, Defra has admitted ministers did not follow the formal advice and demonstrated no reason as to why. If the department does not follow Natural England's advice, it is legally required to show the reasons why.

## **Environment & Natural Capital**

### **Scotland scraps emissions reduction target**

The Scottish government is dropping its target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 75% by 2030 as it has been deemed unachievable. The final goal of reaching net zero by 2045 will remain. This comes after ministers missed eight of the last 12 annual targets. The Climate Change Committee warned in 2022 that Scotland had lost its lead over the rest of the UK and 12 months later said the 2030 target was unreachable. Progress on reducing emissions has been made; by 2021 greenhouse gas emissions had fallen by 49.2% compared with the 1990 baseline. However, this was not enough, with the law requiring a 51.1% fall by that date to keep the nation on track.

At the same time, details of climate change measures affecting land use and agriculture were announced. These included:

- A pilot scheme to establish how the use of methane-suppressing feed products/additives can be encouraged and supported
- Recruitment of up to three new areas for establishing Regional Land Use Partnerships
- Investigation into how partial peatland re-wetting can co-exist with continued agricultural activity and access to agricultural support
- Further research on costs and benefits of partial peatland re-wetting, including up to £1 million invested in pilot partial re-wetting projects
- Developing a national scheme which incentivises deer management and investment into the venison supply chain
- A consultation during the summer of 2024 on options for a carbon land tax on larger landholdings that could incentivise peatland restoration, afforestation and renewable energy generation.

### **Nature markets update**

Nature markets across the UK continue to develop. Biodiversity Net Gain became mandatory for larger sites in February and has now been extended to smaller sites. In March the British Standards Institute published its consultation paper on the overarching principles and framework for nature markets, known as BSI Flex 701. Specific standards for biodiversity and natural carbon markets are expected later this year. An illustration of the potential value of nature markets can be found in Scotland's recent natural capital market framework engagement paper. This predicts that using private finance to help meet Scotland's climate and nature restoration goals will create an additional 343,000 direct and indirect jobs, adding £17 billion to the Scottish economy in largely rural areas.

To unlock this opportunity and following the publication of the draft UK standard BSI Flex 701, the Scottish government has launched a separate consultation paper on natural capital market development. The paper confirms Scotland intends to publish a natural capital market framework in 2024, building on, for example, the existing interim principles for responsible investment. The framework will set out expectations on market governance, the benefits of private investment in natural capital, and how this will align with Scotland's emerging policy context. For more information on nature market developments across the UK, see our latest [briefing note](#).

### **Review of protected site management on Dartmoor**

A new body to transform the management of Dartmoor will be created by the government and run for two years. It will be independently chaired and implements a recommendation made by an independent review of the

management of the Devon moorland, which advocated for the creation of a Land Use Management Group to support the long-term governance of Dartmoor. The government response also promises to extend Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements so Dartmoor farmers can plan and adapt to any future changes to management. The extension of HLS agreements as well as the transition to Environmental Land Management agreements are also intended to support sustainable food production. In the longer term, the government plans to provide tailored advice for future agri-environment schemes and agreements on Dartmoor and support nature alongside food security. It also wants to explore innovative tools to support the delivery of environmental outcomes and maintain viable upland farming communities.

### Hedgerow regulations laid

Legislation to protect hedgerows has been laid. If approved by Parliament, the Management of Hedgerows (England) Regulations 2024 will put baseline hedgerow management practices into law. The requirements mirror the previous approach under cross-compliance and include:

- A 2-metre buffer strip where a green cover must be established and maintained
- A restriction on cultivating or applying pesticides and fertilisers to the buffer
- A hedgerow-cutting ban from 1 March to 31 August (inclusive).

If agreed by Parliament, the regulations will come into force immediately. On land where there is currently no buffer strip, but which is not used for crop production, the rules will apply from 1 July 2024. Where land is currently in use for crop production, the rules will apply from the end of the first harvest that takes place after the legislation comes into force to allow time for the establishment of a buffer strip.

### River Wye action plan

A nine-point [plan](#) has set out the action Defra will take to halt the decline in the condition of the River Wye Special Area of Conservation. The catchment will become a pilot for transforming how manure is managed and new habitats will be created to keep nutrients and sediments in fields. The actions include:

- The appointment of a local River Champion - Anthea McIntyre a former Member of the European Parliament
- £35 million for poultry manure combustors in the River Wye Special Area of Conservation catchment
- Amendment of the Environmental Permitting Regulations to ensure manure is exported to farms where it will not exceed crop or soil needs.
- Funding for sustainable farming practices
- Piloting the use of on-farm micro anaerobic digesters
- More than double grant approvals for slurry stores
- Work with partners on two landscape recovery projects in the catchment
- Provide funding for two projects delivered with local partners in the next year
- Conduct cross-border research on mitigating phosphate pollution in the unique geography of the area.

## Property & Development

### Labour plans to build homes on the “grey belt”

The Labour Party has previously said it would override planning rules to increase house-building rates. It has recently elaborated on what would be involved. The party would prioritise brown-field sites followed by a new class of land dubbed “grey belt” - this is green belt land which is considered to be of lower merit such as scrubland. The grey belt would not include genuine nature sites and developers of it would be required to improve greenspace whilst also delivering at least 50% affordable housing. Overall, Labour’s target is to build 1.5 million homes over five years, so matching the Conservative’s previous manifesto pledge to develop 300,000 homes a year.

### Biodiversity Net Gain for small sites

Small development sites became subject to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements from 2 April. Small sites are typically those with fewer than 10 homes on a site of less than one hectare or commercial development where floor space created is less than 1,000 square metres or the total site area is less than one hectare. There are still some relevant exemptions to BNG, for example, self-build applications of no more than nine dwellings or on a site smaller than 0.5 hectares are exempted from BNG. If you would like to discuss BNG requirements and units please contact [Johnny Campbell](#).

## Business & Economy

### New Agricultural Landlord-Tenant Code of Practice

An Agricultural Landlord and Tenant [Code of Practice](#) for England has been published and endorsed by the members organisations of the Farm Tenancy Forum. The Rock Review recommended a code of practice and it has been prepared by the Farm Tenancy Forum which Defra subsequently established.

The code contains sections covering the initial grant of a tenancy, engagement during its term, the payment of rent and rent reviews, access to business opportunities such as environmental schemes, termination and renewal, dispute resolution and the role of professional advisers and agents. Across all of these sections, the code focuses on three principles: clarity, communication and collaboration. The code is voluntary and describes minimum expected standards and desirable actions but it notes these desirable actions may not be appropriate in certain circumstances.

### Weather insurance claims at an all-time high

Weather-related insurance claims increased by 36% in 2023 compared to 2022. According to the Association of British Insurers, this led to £573 million being paid out, an annual record for weather damage insurance claims. The rise in claims caused by weather damage was driven largely by storms Babet, Ciarán and Debi, with storm damage claims from homeowners rising to £133 million. Damage to property from flooding totalled a further £286 million with an additional £153 million worth of claims resulting from burst pipes during the early-year cold snap. Businesses also suffered high levels of weather damage leading to £443 million of claims.

## Other Rural News

### And finally...

#### Could birdsong top the charts?

From Blackbird by the Beatles to Missy Elliott's The Rain, sounds of nature pop up in our music more than you might expect. A new initiative will now see nature officially recognised as an artist on major streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. Songs which list nature as a featured artist will see a share of their profits go to environmental causes. London Grammar, MØ, Tom Walker and Ellie Goulding have all contributed songs to the first wave of releases. It is hoped the project, called "Sounds Right" will raise £32 million for nature in its first four years.

If you have queries about any of the articles, please contact us.

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