

Food & Farming

Fairer milk contracts

New regulations will allow dairy farmers to challenge prices, prevent changes being made to milk contracts without agreement and make it easier to raise concerns. This will be achieved using powers within the Agriculture Act and follows a similar announcement relating to the pig sector in April. Farmers will see clearer pricing terms, with contracts setting out how the milk price is calculated and allowing them to challenge prices if the correct procedure is not followed. Clear rules will be put in place on notice periods and contractual exclusivity, protecting the rights of both buyers and sellers. Contractual changes will no longer be possible without the farmer's prior agreement.

Wales: Government sticks to 10% tree plan

Every farm in Wales must have at least 10% tree cover to be eligible for public funding. Welsh rural affairs minister Lesley Griffiths doubled down on the commitment when making a statement to the Senedd on the development of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). Ms Griffiths acknowledged that flexibility would be required on the tree cover requirement, with areas unsuitable for tree planting being excluded from the total area used to calculate the 10% requirement and existing tree cover would count towards it too. Excluded areas could include designated sites and deep peat, unplatable features including scree and rock outcrops, and tenanted land where tenants do not have the right to plant trees. The Welsh government's targets are to plant 43,000 hectares by 2030 and 180,000 hectares by 2050. Farming bodies remain concerned and consider the mandatory tree cover requirement to be a significant barrier to scheme participation. The final consultation on the SFS scheme is due to be launched later this year, with the finalised scheme details announced in 2024 prior to implementation in 2025.

The government also published its response to feedback on the SFS design. It confirmed wherever possible the scheme will:

- Reward maintenance of existing good practice as well as the establishment of new practices
- Offer an incentive and give farmers the tools they need to improve
- Offer more flexibility and be less prescriptive than previous schemes
- Take an outcome focused approach
- Be adaptable to different farms and landscapes.

Wales: Interim agri-environment scheme announced for 2024

An interim agri-environment scheme will be launched in Wales to cover the gap between Glastir Advanced, Commons and Organic farmers scheme contracts ending on 31 December 2023 and launch of the Sustainable Farming Scheme in 2025. It will ensure the important gains made by Glastir are maintained and applications will open later in 2023.

Fatal injuries in farming

The latest HSE Fatal Injuries in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing in GB [report](#) has been released. It revealed 27 people were killed in agriculture between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, down on the five-year average which stands at 31. Six were members of the public, including one child, with injuries caused by animals being the most common cause. Fatal injuries are most common in those aged over 45, with the rate of fatal injuries markedly higher for those aged 60 and over. The number of fatal injuries to workers in the agricultural sector has halved since the early 1980s and has been following a broadly downward trend in recent years.

To highlight the importance of this issue the Farm Safety Week campaign run by the Farm Safety Foundation / Yellow Wellies closely followed the release of the report, running between 17 and 21 July. During the week the NFU launched its 'Take 5 to Stay Alive' campaign which promotes regular breaks and taking five minutes before each new task to evaluate it and think of ways to make it safer.

Policy

Tackling crime in rural areas

The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill has passed its final reading and is now awaiting Royal Assent. The Bill aims to prevent the theft of machinery and equipment used by the agricultural sector in England and Wales, in particular quad bikes and All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs). It provides a power for the Secretary of State to make regulations requiring immobilisers and forensic marking to be fitted as standard to all new equipment and define the minimum standards for these additions. There will be a requirement for the seller to maintain a record of the buyer from the date of sale for a specified period, likely to be 10 years.

On-the spot fines for litter, graffiti and fly-tipping are set to rise as part of a crackdown on anti-social behaviour. The implementation of the Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan means environmental crimes will command greater punishments, for example:

- The maximum fine for fly-tipping will increase from £400 to £1,000
- The maximum fine for littering or graffiti will increase from £150 to £500
- The maximum fine for those who breach their household waste duty of care will increase from £400 to £600.

These changes will come into effect on 31 July 2023. In addition to increasing the upper limit on fines, the government launched a consultation on ringfencing the receipts from fixed penalty notices for littering and fly-tipping to fund local authorities' enforcement and clean-up activities.

Survey on soil health

MPs are asking farmers to take part in a [survey](#) on improving soil health. The results will feed into the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's inquiry into soil health which is analysing how the government is supporting farmers to protect and enhance soils. If you are interested in finding out more about soil health, soil carbon schemes and the economics of regenerative agriculture read our latest [Spotlight on Soil](#).

Environment & Natural Capital

Demand for species reintroduction strategy

Land managers should be compensated for the negative effects of species reintroduction. That is the recommendation of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee's (EFRA) final [report](#) on Species Reintroduction. Consultants should also be in place in certain instances, such as the release of beavers, to steward species releases and migration to help them to co-exist with landowners and communities. This approach, the report said, is the best way to mitigate concerns and provide reassurance to land managers potentially impacted by high-risk reintroduction projects.

Overall, the EFRA committee suggests the government needs a more comprehensive, long term species reintroduction strategy. Presently it is unclear which plant and animal reintroductions are supported and there is no current long-term vision for how reintroductions fit into the government's species abundance targets. It has called for a list of priority species for reintroduction to clarify this.

The current system for reintroducing species was also deemed to be hindering nature recovery due to its overly bureaucratic nature. There are many species that pose no risk if reintroduced; identifying these species would give confidence to stakeholders seeking to reintroduce them and reduce the burden on Defra. Those that are high risk should be subject to a national, independent impact assessment to review their potential benefits and risks, including to food production, infrastructure and disease implications.

Polluters must pay

New laws will scrap the cap on civil penalties on environmental offenses and significantly broaden their scope to target a much wider range of crimes. The current limit of £250,000 on variable monetary penalties that the Environment Agency and Natural England can impose directly on operators will be lifted. This comes after a [consultation](#) on strengthening environmental civil sanctions was met with widespread support. New powers will also enable these higher penalties to be levied as a civil sanction for offences under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016, the regime under which most Environment Agency investigations take place. It is hoped this will generate a quicker pathway to enforcement than criminal prosecutions.

Property & Development

PM's plan to break the housebuilding logjam

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is considering how to use the Levelling Up Bill to override the EU case law underpinning nutrient neutrality guidance. In November 2018, the Dutch Nitrogen Case led to consent being blocked for new housing developments which would add to the nutrient load on internationally protected sites. In the UK this

judgement has been calculated as affecting 70 councils and the development of 120,000 new homes, but the impact is likely to be greater as a recent High Court case ruled that 'nutrient neutrality' rules apply to the discharge of planning conditions for existing planning permissions too.

In order to get Britain building Mr Sunak is reportedly inclined to support a move that allows developments to go ahead in advance of sewage treatment works being upgraded to cope with increased nutrient load. The implication of this would be that the nutrient loading at the protected site would be high in the intervening period.

Mr Sunak has come under heavy criticism for the lack of movement in the new build pipeline, with the number of new homes being granted planning permission in England collapsing to its lowest level since 2008. A group of almost 200 small and medium-sized firms have said they are facing an existential threat to their survival in a letter to the Prime Minister. The firms say they do not have the financial ability to take the risk of buying land to pursue new projects, fearing they will be turned down for planning permission. Eighty percent of firms say they are considering scaling back or ending their residential construction work.

At Prime Minister's Questions, Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer criticised the collapse in housebuilding since mandatory new build targets were scrapped. Mr Sunak defended the government's record, saying housing supply was up 10% in the last year, however it looks on track to miss its target of building 300,000 new homes a year in England by the mid-2020s. The government says it remains committed to the target but has given local councils more flexibility in meeting centrally set targets. Alongside this it has announced plans to focus housebuilding in urban areas by pushing forward with projects on brownfield land. It is understood this will involve forming development corporations that would be able to use compulsory purchase powers to acquire brownfield land and assemble sites.

Rebellion over onshore wind

Twenty-one Conservative MPs have pushed for the de facto ban on onshore wind to be lifted by signing an amendment to the Energy Bill put forward by Alok Sharma. Mr Sharma's amendment is being backed by former Prime Minister Liz Truss and former levelling up secretary Simon Clarke, amongst others. Clarke had tabled an amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill whilst still in office, which would have allowed new onshore wind projects in England. The government committed to the change no later than April 2023. Sharma's amendment would remove the current restriction which effectively means even one local objection can block consent for onshore wind developments. Local views would still however be prioritised as the amendment would also ensure that the refusal of a planning permission for onshore wind cannot be overturned on appeal.

Scotland: Improving crofters' homes

The Croft House Grant has been extended. Crofters can now apply for grants of up to £38,000 towards the costs of home improvements which will help them save energy. If a croft has no house, the scheme can help to fund a new build, depending on the location of the croft. For crofts in standard areas, £28,000 is available while in high priority areas, the full £38,000 is available. For existing houses in need of renovation, the scheme can be used to fund upgrades, with the grant covering 60% of costs. Again, a maximum of £28,000 is available in standard areas and £38,000 in high priority areas. Both tenants and owner-occupiers are eligible to apply. A [Croft House Grant](#) can also be obtained even if an existing property has been decrofted or if a property must be built on a separate site because the croft has no suitable sites.

Business & Economy

Permitted development rights extended

The government has extended permitted development rights (PDR) from 28 days per year to 60 days across England. The move means landowners can run pop-up sites for camping, campervans and motorhomes for up to 60 days per year without needing to apply for planning permission. Some stipulations do remain, for example, the site can offer no more than 50 pitches, must provide toilet and waste disposal facilities and operators must notify their local authority before the season starts. To accept tents for more than 42 consecutive days, a camping licence would still be required. A caravan site licence is likely to be required to accept motorhomes or campervans.

The move was first trialled between the Covid lockdowns where it doubled from 28 days to 56 days per year to help rural communities recover from the pandemic. The initial relaxation is estimated to have injected an extra £25 million into the rural economy in 2021 and it is hoped the recent extension could do the same. Some organisations have opposed the move, concerned the relaxation could lead to damage to protected sites. To qualify, sites must also not be in the curtilage of a listed building, on an SSSI or scheduled monument.

UK joins Indo-Pacific trade group

The UK has formally joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, representing the biggest trade deal since Brexit. Britain is the first new member to join the bloc since its formation in 2018, joining Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam within the partnership. Britain already had agreements with all members except Malaysia and Brunei, however officials say it will deepen existing arrangements. Opponents say the impact will be limited, with estimates suggesting it will add just £1.8 billion a year to the economy after 10 years. The Trade and Agriculture Commission will scrutinise the new agreement and present its advice to parliament. The scrutiny should theoretically ensure the agreement is consistent with the maintenance of UK levels of statutory protection in relation to animal or plant life or health; animal welfare; and environmental protections. The agreement is expected to come into force in the second half of 2024.

Other Rural News

And finally... The crowd goes wild!

Local Sunday league football conjures images of muddy fields, enthusiastic players and vocal onlookers. The latest sustainability strategy from the Football Association (FA) could see ponds and wildflowers accompanying those vocal onlookers around the edges of the pitches. The “playing for the future” strategy is a five-year strategy split into three core areas, including one that aims to optimise resource consumption. As well as reducing water consumption by 30% by 2028 and avoiding waste, there are aims to protect biodiversity across all FA venues. Specifically, the FA will deliver a new woodland and wildlife park at St. George’s Park and identify opportunities for biodiversity and rewilding across football.

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