

Food & Farming

August applications for Sustainable Farming Incentive

The Sustainable Farming Incentive 2023 will start accepting applications from August. When applying, farmers will only be shown the options available to their farm and will be able to choose their own combination of actions in a new 'pick and mix' structure. There is also no minimum or maximum land area or hedgerow length, so farmers can choose how much land to cover with their SFI agreement.

Farmers will be paid for 23 actions that support food production while also protecting and improving the environment. The actions cover existing themes including soil health and moorland, as well as new actions on hedgerows, pest management, nutrient management, farmland wildlife, buffer strips, and low input grassland. Farmers could be paid £10 per 100 metre for managing one side of a hedgerow, £129 per hectare for multi-species cover crops, or £589 for a nutrient management review.

Scotland: Support for next gen farmers

The Farming Opportunities for New Entrants (FONE) Group has facilitated over 80 new entrants to farming by providing 122 land opportunities across more than 7,000 hectares of land. The FONE group has supported the governance of the Scottish Government's Starter Farm Initiative which is designed to encourage new entrants into farming. The Initiative was recently [reviewed](#) by Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) who determined the experience of new farmers on the Starter Farm Units made available by the scheme. Eight of 10 tenants were interviewed following a semi-structured interview process in summer 2022.

Some negative comments were made, for example the tenants reported initial expected capital needs of c. £39k but generally had to spend considerably more. Not all tenants were eligible for the full range of agricultural support payments at the outset of their lease which they believe put them at a disadvantage in the industry. Some also believed that agri-environment climate scheme opportunities have been limited due to 5-year commitments and application rounds falling within 5-years of the initial lease termination date.

There were several of positive outcomes. The tenants have generally improved their personal and business skills and many felt fully embedded in their local community through working and contract relationships with other local farmers, employing local people, children attending local schools and participating in local events. All tenants wanted to continue farming after their starter farm tenancy ends with one already entering into a new tenancy. Most tenants would also encourage other potential new entrants to take on a starter farm.

Policy

Labour's plans for clean energy

The Labour Party wants to make the UK a clean energy superpower as part of its [five missions for a better Britain](#). In doing so, it hopes to cut energy bills, create good jobs, deliver security and provide climate leadership. To cut energy bills and create jobs, the party will "back the builders, not the blockers" and establish both CB Energy, a publicly owned clean energy champion, and the National Wealth Fund, which will invest alongside the private sector in gigafactories, clean steel plants, renewable-ready ports, green hydrogen and energy storage. The fund will also support a Warm Homes Plan which seeks to upgrade 19 million homes.

The Labour Party has recently concluded a consultation processes on its policies for energy, food and rural affairs. Given Labour is polling strongly against other political parties, the implementation of these policies appears to be a realistic possibility in the future. Our latest briefing note sets out what Labour's rural policies might look like, covering energy, environment, trade, food and housing.

Environmental court for Scotland?

A Scottish consultation has proposed the idea of a dedicated environmental court. The consultation is seeking feedback on the country's current environmental governance and wants to know if the establishment of a dedicated environmental court could enhance that governance. In particular, the consultation wants to know whether

provisions of the Continuity Act have ensured that there continues to be effective and appropriate governance relating to the environment following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. The consultation closes on 29 September.

First Minister Humza Yousaf has now appointed a new Environment Minister to join the Scottish Government. Yousaf's initial Cabinet reshuffle saw the former Environment Minister, Mairi McAllan, moved to the role of Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Just Transition. McAllan's former responsibilities then appeared to have been left with Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands. Now the responsibility for environmental issues appears to have been given to Gillian Martin MSP, who is the current Energy Minister.

Welsh environmental law reorganised

The Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2023 brings together the main pieces of legislation relating to Wales' historic environment. It is the first piece of consolidated legislation to be produced as part of the Welsh Government's programme to reform Welsh law and make it more accessible. Legislation will be modernised, organised and written in simple, everyday language. The law for the historic environment will be also be the first published in a fully bilingual format. At its heart, the legislation identifies a need to identify and designate historic assets, such as buildings, monuments and areas, that are of special interest at a national level. For this reason, the legislation brings together a variety of Acts such as the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953, the 1990 Listed Buildings Act and Part 5 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, amongst others. More detail can be found in the [explanatory memorandum](#), published when the new legislation was first introduced in July 2022.

Independent review of Dartmoor

David Fursdon, current chair of the institute for agricultural and horticulture, will lead an independent evidence review into the management of protected sites on Dartmoor alongside a panel of experts. The panel will ultimately look to provide an independent perspective on the management of the protected sites on the moor. It will:

- Consider the current management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) across Dartmoor
- Use existing ecological evidence to determine why some sites are seeing improvements and others are not
- Recommend the most effective management regime(s) to deliver improvements on SSSI sites
- Advise what is needed to support delivery of that regime consistent with existing legally binding targets

Environment & Natural Capital

Rewet lowland peat to meet emissions target

Rewetting half of England's lowland peat could deliver a fifth of the emissions savings that farming needs to achieve by 2030. Research by the Green Alliance said food grown in these areas has a much higher carbon footprint than imports of soya from Brazil. Rewetting peat would also help restore habitats for birds, wildlife and plant species. The thinktank argues that rewetting these areas would have little impact on food production but make a substantial contribution to the UK's efforts to reach net zero.

Farming groups such as the NFU disagree, stating that the East Anglian fens produce more than 7% of England's total agricultural production and so land use change would seriously impact food security. The NFU also pointed out fields could not be rewetted in isolation, and there was a risk of flooding to surrounding areas. The Soil Association echoed the comments, stating that increased reliance on imports could lead to habitat loss elsewhere in the world.

Co-op and RSPB support peatland restoration

The Co-op will support the restoration of upland peatland habitats through a new partnership with the RSPB. The partnership will focus on peatland that is being eroded across an area equivalent to 400 football pitches. In the first instance, restoration efforts will take place in Cerniau, Wales, and Lumbister, on Shetland. The launch follows on from the Co-op's 10-point Climate Action Plan, published in 2021, while details the retailer's pathway to a net-zero value chain by 2040. The Co-op will not count carbon removals resulting from peatland restoration towards its own carbon targets. Instead, they will simply be an additional benefit.

Insurance firm funds rainforest purchase

A 30-hectare site near Totnes, Devon, will be the next site to benefit from a £38 million tie-up between the Wildlife Trusts and insurance firm Aviva. The firm announced the donation in February, before the Wildlife Trusts announced the first two sites to benefit would be on the Isle of Man and north Wales. The Devon Wildlife Trust has now taken a 105-year lease on the Totnes site with the help of the fund, plus a "generous legacy" from a Devon Wildlife Trust supporter. The new nature reserve, to be called Bowden Pillars, will include the creation of new rainforest as well as a new regenerative farm.

Aviva has also announced a partnership with the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) to restore saltmarsh habitats. The partnership will see Aviva donate £21 million to WWT to restore up to 250 hectares of saltmarsh. It also seeks to develop a best practice approach through research to help fill evidence gaps and provide a catalyst for further investment in saltmarsh creation.

Scotland's natural capital accounts

Scotland's natural capital has remained stable in the past year. A new NatureScot report published today reveals the value of Scotland's coastal, heathland, mires, bogs and fens have remained steady. The value of woodland habitat has improved by 1.6 percent and the value of grassland has decreased by two percent. After a long period of decline, agricultural land has increased by 3.5 percentage points.

The 2023 report on Scotland's natural capital accounts looks at natural capital stocks as measured in 2019 and outlines the following statistics:

- The total asset value of natural capital in Scotland is an estimated £230 billion in 2019
- Provisioning services account for 89% of Scotland's annual value in 2019, predominantly oil and gas (£12 billion) and agricultural biomass (£706 million)
- Air pollution removal had the highest annual value of the regulating services, worth £145 million in avoided health impacts in 2019
- Renewable electricity generation in 2021 was three times greater than in 2008, despite a 15% fall between 2020 and 2021
- Between 1990 and 2021, the extent of mountain, moorland and heath decreased from 34% to 26%

Property & Development

Councils must be ready to defend BNG targets

If planning authorities intend to require developers to deliver more than 10% biodiversity net gain (BNG) on new projects, they must ensure they have robust local evidence to defend their policies. That is the advice of Natural England, who also advised councils to have their arguments lined up to defend their policy and be clear on what the policy is. From November, it will become mandatory for developers to deliver a minimum 10% biodiversity net gain on most new developments but no more. Any surplus required by a council, such as Cambridge County Council which is already requiring developers to deliver 20% BNG, could be subject to challenge.

In response to the emerging market for BNG credits and other forms of natural capital, Savills has launched the Savills Environmental Exchange (SEE). The map based mechanism looks to connect parties seeking or providing natural capital offsets and currently has over 40,000 hectares of land available to deliver the offsets.

Geospatial Strategy to support land use

The new UK Geospatial Strategy 2030 will explore the creation of a Land Use Analysis Taskforce by the end of 2024. This taskforce intends to create a spatial analysis capability that will provide evidence on how land can be best used to deliver national priorities. The strategy also sets out the intention to

- Champion market innovations that help visualise and deliver better land use decisions
- Strengthen the links between land use policy design, academic research and industry practice
- Develop a standard approach to classifying key land use data

Business & Economy

Nature for Finance event

The first 'Nature for Finance' event saw the launch an additional round of the Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF) announced. This round will be the first time the NEIRF focuses specifically on the farming sector, seeking to address barriers to accessing private investment for nature recovery. Specifically it hopes to fund projects which have the potential to create revenue from enhancing nature which will allow farmers to attract and repay investment. To date, 86 projects across England have received development grants of up to £100,000 through two competitive rounds of the £10 million NEIRF in 2021 and 2022.

The start of the piloting phase of a new version of the Green Finance Institute's (GFI) investment readiness toolkit was also announced. This will offer farmers advice on how to create investable nature finance projects, with the pilot looking to gather evidence on the specific needs of farmers. The government will also consult later this year on specific steps needed to mobilise additional nature finance.

Other Rural News

And finally... Cyclists helping cows

What do cyclists get up to on their bike rides? A cake and coffee stop? Probably. Dodging potholes? Definitely. Delivering a calf? Apparently so! A [video](#) has emerged of a cyclist, fully clad in helmet and Lycra, helping to deliver a calf. After delivering the calf and ensuring the mother was tending to the new born, the cyclist remounted his nearby bike and rode off. It does not seem to be the only time cyclists have aided cows in recent times. New cycling-friendly cattle grids in Cambridge have allowed cows to make a bid for freedom. Cows have been spotted roaming on footpaths around the city after they figured out how to avoid stepping on the grids. The exodus became so regular, an underpass running alongside the River Cam has now been closed off to prevent more cows escaping.

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