

Food & Farming

What does cheap food really cost?

Following a two year inquiry, the independent RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) [reports](#) that having the third cheapest food amongst developed countries has caused a degraded environment, spiralling ill-health and impoverished high streets. The Commission says farming must undergo radical change to become more sustainable while still producing more and better fresh fruit, vegetables, and nuts and pulses. Less but better meat and dairy should come from nature friendly production and there should be efforts to achieve zero food waste and rebuild farmers' relationships with food producers and each other.

Following the inquiry, Caroline Lucas, former leader of the Green Party, said the report "provides a clear diagnosis" and highlights a "need to farm in harmony with nature and put public and planetary health at the heart of food policy". She criticised the "malign influence of the pesticide industry", citing that half of all agronomists are employed by agrochemical companies. She drew attention to the FFCC's recommendation for "independent and credible knowledge to make substantial changes" and echoed its call for "a radical transformation".

The Crop Protection Association (CPA) responded by saying Ms Lucas' accusations against pesticides "could not be further from the truth". It said its associated companies "go beyond chemicals" and "play a critical role in supporting farmers". The Association argues that by maximising productivity through crop protection, more land is left for nature. A recent [report](#) for the CPA calculated that without pesticides, the average shopping bill would increase by £786 a year, which is not a viable option in a nation where eight million people are in food poverty. The CPA warned that "scaremongering about pesticides" will worsen the health crisis by making consumers "fearful of conventionally produced fresh fruit and vegetables without reason".

Call for evidence on food security

The Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment is investigating whether a healthier and more sustainable diet can be made more accessible. Life expectancy for the lowest income groups is nearly 20 years shorter than the highest. Diet is a significant factor here with healthy food being three times more expensive than unhealthy food, according to the Lord's Committee Chair, Lord Krebs. [Submissions](#) to its food insecurity and sustainability inquiry can be made until 12 September 2019.

Scotland: National Basic Payment Support Scheme

Eligible farmers will be able to claim a loan equivalent to 95% of their Basic Payment Scheme 2019 payment. By using the loans to release funding early, the Scottish Government gives farmers better financial certainty rather than them having to wait for their subsidy payment to be processed. Loan letters will be issued in early September. Farmers will need to opt into the scheme and will start to receive loan payments from early October.

Policy

What does Boris mean for farming?

Many will now be looking for new Prime Minister Boris Johnson to follow up on promises made in his leadership campaign. For agriculture, these included:

- £160 million of convergence money to Scottish farmers
- A possible ban on live animal exports
- An intolerance of "extremism, intimidation and abuse" with respect to activism
- Funds "to address imbalances that affect rural communities"
- Immigration that reflects "the particular needs of the sectors concerned"

What many in the farming community are against, due to the expected economic damage, is a no-deal Brexit. But Mr Johnson's "do or die" approach to leaving on 31 October may just deliver it. He has promised "proper protections"

and “insulation” for farmers but has not yet given any specifics. The new PM’s seemingly close relationship to Donald Trump may also be of concern. While some hope this may bring an improved trade deal, others are concerned it will lead to cheap imports with lower standards.

In his first commons speech as Prime Minister, Mr Johnson set out his vision to make Britain the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe by 2050. Rural areas with poor mobile and broadband connectivity will welcome the investment necessary for us to have the “most formidable transport and technological connectivity on the planet”. He also said we would have “a bio-science sector liberated from anti-genetic modification rules, [and] blight-resistant crops that will feed the world”.

Mr Johnson’s new cabinet sees Michael Gove move to the Cabinet Office where he has been instructed to turbocharge no-deal planning and make it his top priority. Mr Gove has been replaced as Defra Secretary of State by Theresa Villiers, an experienced politician who has a background in law and was most recently Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. A pro-Brexit MP, like most of Johnson’s new cabinet, Ms Villiers has supported the hunting ban and has a mixed environmental record; she appears to support fracking and has voted against tougher greenhouse gas reduction targets, but in favour of lifestyle changes to mitigate climate change. George Eustice returns to Defra as Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries & Food whilst Thérèse Coffey has been promoted to Minister of State at the department. Zac Goldsmith joins the department as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, whilst former Minister of State Robert Goodwill does not have a ministerial role in the new Government.

Stakeholder reactions

Tim Breitmeyer, President of the Country Land and Business Association, called for the new government to provide much needed reassurance to farmers in uncertain times, saying “in the long term it will be possible for rural businesses to adapt to the changing political landscape, just as they always have done. But for the immediate future, the uncertainty is deeply concerning and brings into sharp focus the need for a long term funding settlement to replace the Common Agricultural Policy”.

NFU President Minette Batters reemphasised that a departure that includes free and frictionless trade with the EU is crucial in delivering the best outcome for British food production. In addition, she set out five policy priorities:

- Stimulating farm business competitiveness and innovation
- Rising to the challenges of tackling climate change
- Promoting our high food standards through trade policy
- Ensuring an adequate supply of labour
- A long-term budgetary commitment for food and farming

Shooting industry returns fire

Wild Justice is planning a new legal challenge over the environmental impact of releasing game birds. A crowdfunding campaign has raised over £30,000 in less than a month to support the challenge. The organisation believes the Government should conduct an environmental impact assessment each year into the release of 50 million non-native birds in the UK. Its lawyers argue the failure to do so is in breach of the EU habitats directive. Wild Justice claims that “people forget that pheasants go around gobbling up adders, lizards and all sorts of invertebrates”. It added that dead pheasants are “feeding foxes, carrion crows and others, which go on to eat other, rarer species”.

Tom Adams, MD of the British Game Alliance, has said the actions of Wild Justice “would be cataclysmic” for rural areas. Whilst Caroline Bedell, of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation called the latest challenge “another extremist attack on shooting... that ignores well-documented evidence of the benefits of shooting to conservation and the wider environment”. She argued that “The Code of Good Shooting Practice... sets out figures for sustainable game bird releasing”. Ms Bedell pointed out the environmental benefits of well-managed shoots; “shoots maintain 25,000 hectares of cover crops which provide important sources of food and shelter for songbirds, particularly during the winter”. She added “shoots actively manage 500,000 hectares of woodland and 100,000 hectares of copses for the benefit of the environment”.

Scotland: General licence consultation

Scottish Natural Heritage has opened a 12 week [consultation](#) covering circumstances when wild birds can be controlled under General Licence. Responses will be considered as part of an exercise to identify if it needs to make any changes to the current set of licences for 2020.

Environment & Natural Capital

More light shed on biodiversity net gain and conservation covenants

On 23 July, before the changes in government and Defra leadership, a policy statement containing firm policy positions for the Environment Bill was published along with the Government's policy responses to six public consultations. Keen to show the planned 'Office of Environmental Protection' (OEP) will have teeth, the Government promised that the OEP will have the power to undertake its own investigations at its own instigation and to bring legal proceedings against central government and public authorities. Of most relevance to rural landowners were announcements relating to biodiversity 'net gain' and conservation covenants. The Government will legislate to require developers to ensure habitats are enhanced, with a 10% increase in habitat for wildlife compared with the pre-development baseline. Mitigation on site or in close proximity would be favoured and the net gain outcome (i.e. improved biodiversity) will need to be maintained for at least 30 years. To help ensure the mitigation work contributes towards local biodiversity priorities, led by local public bodies local Nature Recovery Strategies will be created for all of England. In situations where a developer is unable to source mitigation habitat locally, a supply of statutory biodiversity units will be available to prevent development becoming delayed.

The response to the conservation covenant consultation was very clear that these are voluntary agreements between a landowner and a 'responsible body' (for example, a conservation charity) to help deliver positive local conservation outcomes which must be in the public good. They give landowners the opportunity to legally lock in the benefits generated by policies like net gain and farming reform, because they are capable of being binding on future owners. There will be no direct public funds or tax incentives to support or encourage covenants and no role of the public sector or public in the monitoring or enforcement of covenants. Tenants will be able to grant conservation covenants providing they have a lease of at least seven years, with some time remaining on it, and that the commitments made don't breach the terms of their lease.

Restoring peatlands, a potential 500% return on capital

Peatlands cover 12% of the UK's land area and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has just leased a natural capital valuation of the ecosystem services which they provide to society. Found in the uplands and lowlands, peats include some of the highest and lowest value agricultural land. ONS calculate that drainage and ploughing leads to the release of 7,600 kilotonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per year. Only 22% of peatlands are in a near natural or rewetted condition; consequently, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) has estimated peatlands are emitting around 23,100 kilotonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per year in total. The costs of restoring 100% of peatlands could be between £8 billion and £22 billion over 100 years, but savings of up to £109 billion in terms of reduced carbon emissions are predicted. The soils also supply over a quarter of the UK's drinking water, valued at £888 million in 2016, and are used for 180 million hours of recreation valued at £274 million. The Committee on Climate Change's (CCC) aim for 55% of peatlands to be returned to good status in the next 100 years would cost between £45 billion to £51 billion. As the country works to achieve net zero by 2050, there will be challenges and opportunities for the owners of peatland.

Game and Conservation Benchmarking survey results

To coincide with the Game Fair, Savills [launched the results](#) of its Game and Conservation Benchmarking survey which is run in association with the GWCT. As the UK looks to take an increasingly environmentally focused approach to land use and management, the results for the 2018/19 season demonstrate the significant amount of environmental management work already undertaken by shoots and their ongoing commitment to it. Meanwhile shoot economics continue to be finely balanced as inflating costs necessitate increased charges.

Property & Development

England: How the Government intends to end no fault evictions

Aiming to strike a 'fairer deal' for both landlords and tenants, the Government is [consulting](#) on how section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 has been used in the past, and the circumstances in which landlords should be able to regain possession once it has been abolished. By abolishing section 21 all future residential tenancies in England will be assured rather than assured shorthold. The changes are not intended to apply retrospectively. The consultation and an accompanying [Q & A](#) document reveal three additional or amended grounds for possession under section 8 are currently planned:

1. For landlords to seek possession of their property where they need it for occupation by a family member (rather than just themselves at present)
2. For landlords to seek possession of their property where they need to sell it (this would need a prior notice)
3. Allowing a landlord to gain possession of their property where a tenant prevents them from maintaining legal safety standards.

For rural businesses the impact upon their flexibility to make housing available for additional employees is likely to be an area of concern. The consultation is open until 12 October.

Business & Economy

Hemp farm to lose £200,000

Hempen, one of the UK's largest hemp farms, may have to destroy its crop after losing its licence, potentially costing around £200,000 in sales. UK farmers can harvest the stalk and seeds of the hemp plant under licence, but not the flowers. Hempen said it would cease growing hemp for CBD oil and switch to cold pressed seed oil and hemp flour after Home Office guidance was released in November. The company has been told to cease production and destroy its 40 acre crop by the Home Office after its application for a new licence was rejected. Hempen co-founder Patrick Gillett said "hemp is offering green shoots of hope" to farmers but is being restricted by "the Home Office's bureaucracy".

7% of UK food is wasted on farm

A new [report](#) from WRAP reveals that £650 million of food is being wasted each year before it leaves the farm gate in the UK. A significant amount is due to the produce not meeting supermarket cosmetic standards. An additional £500 million of surplus food each year is diverted to lower value markets such as animal feed and anaerobic digestion or donated to food charities. If growers can work with supermarkets on specification and production planning to ensure a higher proportion of their output can be sold for its primary use, this could significantly boost productivity.

Whilst only part of the solution, Defra's £15 million initiative to help offset the costs of redistributing edible surplus food to charities and communities is making progress. FareShare is one of four recipients of the first phase of funding and has launched a £3 million project. The charity plans to give companies up to £50,000 to support additional staff required for sorting, packing and distributing surpluses. Alternatively the grant can be used to build, implement and manage new processes. The fund is open to growers, farmers, producers, pack houses, processors, co-packers, importers, wholesalers and retailers across the UK.

Other Rural News

And finally...

Making Mars fit for farming

Fifty years ago after becoming the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong sat down for a meal of bacon squares, peaches, sugar cookie cubes, pineapple-grapefruit drink and coffee. Rather than taking a dehydrated pack up from Earth, could the first astronauts on Mars grow their own greens? Scientists have developed aerogel sheets which could be used to transform the cold, arid Martian surface into land fit for farming. By mimicking the Earth's greenhouse effect to trap solar energy, the silica sheets would warm the ground and melt enough subsurface ice to keep plants alive. There are however other issues to overcome; the soil is constantly bombarded by radiation and contains potentially toxic chemicals, whilst the thin atmosphere is low on nitrogen.

If you have queries regarding any of the articles, please contact Andrew Teanby.

Contacts



Andrew Teanby
Associate Director
ateanby@savills.com
+44 (0) 1522 507 312



Emily Norton
Head of Rural Research
emily.norton@savills.com
+44 (0) 207 016 3786

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