

Shaun Leavey – Written Evidence (LUE0005)

Evidence to House of Lords Select Committee on Land Use in England

from Shaun Leavey OBE FRAGS

1. I was for many years a Regional Director of the National Farmers' Union. Subsequently I was Chairman of defra's Sustainable Farming & Food Board (SE Region), and also managed land based projects funded by the South East of England Development Agency (SEEDA). My practical experience of farming was gained on an estate in Suffolk and later as a farm manager in Greece (operating a large scale feedlot system and a pedigree beef herd). In retirement I have - until recently - been the farming adviser to Dorset CPRE.
2. During early 2022 I have prepared an assessment of the likely implications for the Dorset landscape of (i) the changes from the post-CAP support regime, (ii) likely trends in technological food development and consumer purchasing, and (iii) specifically the risk to the commercial viability of grassland farming in the low-lying areas of the county.
3. Throughout my time with the NFU, and as a non-executive Chairman of the defra Sustainable Farming & Food regional board, I have consistently argued for increased self-sufficiency in UK temperate food, and against the concept of "food security" when that is understood to rely on imports. The recent war in Ukraine has reinforced my scepticism about any national food policy that fails to optimise domestic production of temperate foodstuffs. Although its publication pre-dated the war in Ukraine by some two years I wholeheartedly endorse the warnings given by Professor Tim Lang in his book "Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them" (Pelican 2020).
4. I regard the Landscape Recovery Scheme as a particularly ill-considered use of the government's limited financial resources, and totally inappropriate at a time when the country needs to maximise food production – not as that scheme would do reduce it by some 3%.
5. I am also extremely sceptical about the concept of "public funds for public goods" when the government seems not to acknowledge the extent to which food production is a "public good". This is especially relevant to areas such as the

Blackmore Vale in Dorset where the scope for offering “public goods” as defined by the government is particularly difficult on the low-lying grassland farms that characterise that part of the county. A significant proportion of the farms there are relatively small family-run holdings with limited options for changing their pattern of husbandry. That is especially so where they are tenanted and lack the collateral for borrowing that is more likely to be available to owner-occupied farms.

6. It concerns me that in the summary of the Select Committee’s role it is stated that: *Within this study we will be considering the role of the key drivers of land use change including climate change, biodiversity decline, population and economic growth, and the extent of their influence.* This seems not to include the strategic importance of increasing England’s capacity to achieve optimum self-sufficiency in temperate food.
7. It is also not clear to me whether current government policies – in particular support measures such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Environmental Land Management schemes (and the Landscape Recovery scheme mentioned above) fall within the Select Committee’s remit. In my view they have the potential to divert on-farm resources away from food production.
8. I have been interested by the extent to which recent discussion of re-wilding, landscape recovery, and encouragement of farm diversification seem to ignore the risk that the farming industry runs of forfeiting its very favourable fiscal benefits. Through successful lobbying of government the farming industry has built up a wide range of financial advantages over other industries. These include rebated fuel (red diesel), tax averaging, freedom from business rates on agricultural land, preferential inheritance tax, and reduced costs for tractor licences. As someone who was part of that lobby I found no difficulty in arguing the farming case because the political rationale was always that this was an industry involved in the vital process of producing food for the nation. As such it could be argued that any increased costs would in the long run push up food prices. But if a significant proportion of farmland is to be taken out of food production why should these fiscal privileges continue to apply ? It seems relevant to pose the question: does the Knepp Castle estate – now re-wilded and producing minimal amounts of food - pay business rates on the acreage not used for food

production ? At a time when the government will be seeking to re-balance the country's finances not only farmers who re-wild, but also those who divert a significant proportion of their holdings into conservation (rather than food production) are surely vulnerable to finding themselves faced with costs from which they were traditionally exempted when they were primarily food producers. I would urge the Select Committee to take a view on this.

9. Lastly I urge that the Select Committee considers the issue of landscape. The aesthetic appearance of the English countryside has been an important part of the nation's cultural heritage for many centuries. Self-evidently the farmed landscape has changed over time. However such changes have either been brought about by war (eg the ploughing of grassland to increase grain production) or at times when for socio-economic reasons any organised opposition to changes on the land have been ineffective against those with vested interest in such changes (eg the enclosure of land and/or the Scottish clearances). In the twenty first century it is very much easier to mobilise opposition to popular causes, and it is not fanciful to expect serious opposition to – say – widespread woodland planting (or solar panels) across the South Downs or the Blackmore Vale in Dorset. Much as many people value wildlife I would suggest that a greater number attach far more than sentimental value to the way that the countryside looks. Major changes to a much loved landscape will be resisted more forcefully (and with greater political effect) than any possible loss of habitat for newts, bats, and badgers. **It is therefore worth the Select Committee recognising that the dominant English landscape of today is still based on a farmed countryside that produces food for national consumption.**

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March 2022