

Sam Awdry, Peter J Blair, Tom Chapman, Angus Dalton, Ian Davis, Anthony Ellis, Rob Garrett, Brian Jones, Huw Jones, Dave Knight, Steve North, Daniel Powell, Karl Starkie, Richard Trevethan – Written Evidence (LUE0054)

Introduction

This evidence is submitted by The Farming Forum Grassroots Group, a group of 14 farmers (listed below). We all interact through “The Farming Forum”, an online network for farmers, and all manage grassland. We span a range of different landscape and activity types from Eastern Counties Lowland to Welsh Upland and from predominately sheep to completely dairy. The factors we all share are: adoption of an “Agroecological” or “Holistic” approach to our land management, a deep concern for the ecological damage done to British farmland across the last 60+ years and concern at the ever-declining profitability of the average British livestock farm. We do not claim to represent the views of the other users of The Farming Forum.

Pressures and challenges

1. What do you see as the most notable current challenges in relation to land use in England? How might these challenges best be tackled? How do you foresee land use in England changing over the long term? How should competing priorities for land use be managed?

House building, intensive agriculture, carbon payment driven planting of non-native trees and farm labour availability currently appear to be the biggest challenges for English land use. All but poor labour availability (which is driven by long term social changes and Brexit) are underpinned by investment returns rather than optimum use of land for combining food production with ecological recovery. The notion of “Land sparing” has become ascendent in influential political circles and is antithetical to UK food security and to recognition of English legal precedence of landowner rights to determine the use of private land. A genuine understanding of the potential of agro-ecological farm management to deliver rapid improvements in both carbon sequestration and biodiversity whilst maintaining or enhancing farm profitability should underlie land use planning.

This can be tackled via more sensible planning policy for rural areas, prioritising sympathetic farming and food production instead of industrialised agriculture, forestry and unnecessary "rewilding". These pressures pose a high risk of rural social collapse as the remaining rural workers drain away. There are already far too few engaged in rural

land management and intensification of agriculture alongside corporate investment in offsetting opportunities driven by greed will compound and accelerate this.

2. What are the key drivers of land use change which need to be planned for, and how should they be planned for? What is the role of multifunctional land use strategies in implementing these plans?

A key driver is currently London based, venture capitalist, money that is disconnected from, and entirely unsympathetic to, the real needs of our environment, domestic food production and the communities, both above and below ground, that rely on land. Also land being bought for lifestyle properties, with no intention of producing food, is an increasing trend. Finally many single issue groups (Rewild Britain, Lynx trust, Rivers Trusts etc) seeking to push their private agendas whilst downplaying or ignoring the wider impacts on landscape or agricultural viability are apparently gaining political traction.

3. How might we achieve greater and more effective coordination, integration and delivery of land use policy and management at a central, regional, local and landscape level?

DEFRA, including the wider "DEFRA family", are not fit for purpose, lacking staff with sufficient understanding of the practicalities of the agricultural industry. The attempts at "Co-Design", whilst laudable, have been largely focussed on major farming representative organisations until very recently. These organisations often fail to represent the genuine interests of the majority of English farmers who run small diverse farm units in favour of larger agri-business operators. The whole issue of land use policy planning is screaming out for massively greater involvement of genuine working farmers and farm managers (many of whom don't have the spare time or mental capacity to actually get involved in it alongside running their businesses).

Farming and land management

4. What impacts are changes to farming and agricultural practices, including food production, likely to have on land use in England? What is the role of new technology and changing standards of land management?

Intensification of farming either driven by government policy to free land for rewilding or in response to rising input costs, carries huge risks for ecology and carbon storage impacts.

New technology is over promoted and mostly benefits the technology providers more than farmers. Technology is notorious for taking time to implement, going over budget, failing to deliver it's promises and rapidly going out of date. Don't over-rely on it. It is people and thought processes that need to be invested in. Food production is complex and has thousands of years of history, we need to step back from technology and understand agro-ecological systems better to deliver the environmental benefits across the whole rural landscape.

5. What impact are the forthcoming environmental land management schemes likely to have on agriculture, biodiversity and wellbeing? What do you see as their merits and disadvantages?

Agriculture: suppress food production, make management more complicated, divert attention from profitability of business, prevent farms from delivering the public goods flexibly as part of a well managed business.

Biodiversity: hard to say, much good work already been done but proposed schemes are too prescriptive and not attractive to farmers. Much of the damage is due to past policy rather than farmers actively seeking to damage biodiversity

Nature, landscape and biodiversity

6. What do you see as the key threats to nature and biodiversity in England in the short and longer term, and what role should land use policy have in tackling these?

Loss of traditional permanent pasture (which already delivers on carbon sequestration and ecological diversity) in favour of rewilding, forestry and land use intensification

- Ongoing calls for further agricultural intensification
- Undue influence of biased agendas
- Selective ignoring of clear scientific evidence
- badger impact on ground nesting birds and hedgehogs
- Large scale non- native tree planting
- collapsing viability of small mixed farms undermining sympathetic nature management

- Lack of involvement of farmers in developing LNR plans rendering them undeliverable at scale
- General absence of genuine farmer involvement in land management policy development leading to adoption of undeliverable policies

Policy should be broad brush whilst supporting farmers to craft business plans in genuine partnership with public sector technical specialists to optimise profitable farming alongside nature friendly delivery

7. What are the merits and challenges of emerging policies such as nature-based solutions (including eco-system and carbon markets), local nature recovery strategies and the biodiversity net gain requirement? Are these policies compatible, and how can we ensure they support one another, and that they deliver effective benefits for nature?

A key challenge for local nature recovery strategies is the tendency for the LNR plans to be written by single issue pressure groups or NGO's without adequate farmer input leading to plans which have no hope of being attractive to farmers, especially grassland farmers, to deliver. Such plans will never scale up.

Investors in ecosystem and carbon markets have very different priorities and targets to those of rural land managers. If the market is left to drive the creation of these then, ultimately, they will be unattractive to farmers to join or manipulative and persecutory if they do. Schemes need to recognise that land value is often critical to farm businesses with debt secured against it. Changing the land use under a long-term legal agreement can seriously cut the land value and so must be reflected in the payment terms on offer.

The risks of badly planned and/or implemented land use policy changes are highlighted in the IPCC AR6 WG3 technical summary (page 142 lines 11 to 15) thus:

*11 If AFOLU measures are deployed badly then, when taken together with the increasing
12 need to produce sufficient food, feed, fuel and wood, they may exacerbate trade-offs
with the
13 conservation of habitats, adaptation, biodiversity and other services. At the same
time the capacity of
14 the land to support these functions may be threatened by climate change. (high
confidence)*

Environment, climate change, energy and infrastructure

8. How will commitments such as the 25-year environment plan and the net zero target require changes to land use in England, and what other impacts might these changes have?

The recent IPCC AR6 working group 3 report makes it clear that the biggest benefits are to be gained from changing energy sourcing to renewables, ceasing global deforestation, optimising agricultural carbon sequestration and restoration of damaged ecosystems. UK agriculture, especially pastoral, is not a big driver of these issues. Reforestation of upland landscapes comes with high risks of carbon failure as exhibited by the storms of the past winter causing widespread tree loss and the increasing frequency of wildfires in the UK.

Unless the ELMS proposals become much more attractive to farmers than the 25 year environment plan will never be delivered.

9. How should land use pressures around energy and infrastructure be managed?

Biofuels are being touted by many, not least the CCC, as a large part of the climate mitigation answer for the UK but are often not effective in cutting climate impact if their land use impact and full lifecycle carbon costs are accounted for. Simply setting large areas aside to grow biofuels will not deliver the national benefits needed and risks large cuts in domestic food security alongside distorting land values further. It is already commonplace for corporate AD units to out-compete food producing farmers in renting land, often many miles from their base, to grow crops to fuel their systems. The carbon impact of these practices cannot be acceptable.

Land use planning

10. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of the existing land use planning system and associated frameworks in England? How effectively does the system manage competing demands on land, including the Government's housing and development objectives? What would be the merits of introducing a formal spatial planning framework or frameworks, and how might it be implemented?

The current English planning system was never intended to plan agricultural landscapes, only the built environment. It has served to drive the value of farmland converted to housing and other built development up greatly, distorting farm land values and corrupting the access to farm land for those entering the farming profession.

11. What lessons may be learned from land use planning frameworks in the devolved nations and abroad, and how might these lessons apply to England?

Conclusion

12. Which organisations would be best placed to plan and decide on the allocation of land for the various competing agendas for land use in England, and how should they set about doing so?

Currently DEFRA, Natural England and the Forestry Commission are fundamentally unfit to fulfil this role as they appear to be driven by pressure groups with little or no understanding of the management needs of a profitable farmed landscape.

Sort land values out and both nature and food production will be allowed to flourish. Ask why land values are so high, and the answer inevitably comes back to someone thinking they may miss out on an opportunity.

Rarely is the opportunity about what the land may yield in terms of food production, it is more about the opportunity of a secure, tax efficient place to store money, and the opportunity of future developments and the astronomical wealth that may come to the landowner should they have gambled the land lottery correctly.

Sort the land tax system out and both ecological and food production decisions will move back to the land managers best placed to deal with the situation on the ground.

Carbon trading, offsets and private funding schemes all bring outside finance into the landscape, when really what the landscape needs is a break away from the stranglehold of the financial world, a chance to breathe.

NOTE: If the committee truly wish to understand the potential of English land being managed in sympathy with nature they could do no better than to attend this year's Groundswell show and conference at Weston in Hertfordshire on June 22nd and 23rd. <https://groundswellag.com/> We are confident that the hosts, John and Paul Cherry, would happily facilitate a visit by members of the committee.

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