

## Written evidence from National Farmers' Union (PAE0023)

### **1. How would you characterise the overall experiences of NFU members who manage respectively protected sites and protected landscapes?**

The experience of NFU members who farm in protected sites and landscapes including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), National Park (NP) or environmental designations, such as SSSIs, varies depending on the landscape. Between January and March 2020, the NFU [surveyed](#) 346 farmer and grower members in the South West, to give them the opportunity to state how having a designated area on their land has affected managing the land and developing their farming business.<sup>1</sup>

Of those surveyed, 53% had at least some farmed land within either a NP and/or AONB. This group was **more likely to feel having landscape designation was disadvantageous rather than beneficial for their business** and held them back in areas such as:

- **Planning:** developing farm buildings (53%), modernising farm buildings (48%), upgrading infrastructure (47%), opportunities to diversify (42%)
- **Finance:** getting access to funding (51%), consultancy costs (50%)
- **Guidance:** receiving support & advice from NP/AONB staff (49%)

When the required management is in harmony with the farming business then there is a better experience. Unfortunately, this is not always the case particularly where changes to site management required by the regulator reduce business viability. Through agri-environment schemes, farmers have been managing protected sites as required by Government advisers, yet the site is not improving. This is leading farmers to question the evidence behind the advice.

### **2. How does the regulatory regime directly governing protected sites (e.g., SSSIs) and landscapes (e.g., national parks) affect NFU members' management of the land and help or hinder their efforts?**

Within protected landscapes, the designation impacts the ability of farm businesses to modernise, improve infrastructure or diversify. These changes might be needed to meet animal health and welfare requirements, other regulatory requirements or to improve business viability. Experience is that planning consent is harder to secure and has additional costs which are not offset in any way.

For many years protected sites have been managed through agri-environment agreements with minimal impact on other land. Now, we are seeing protected sites impacting on the wider farmed landscape. Farmers are affected in the same way as house builders by nutrient neutrality which is preventing them from improving farm infrastructure. High levels of background ammonia, which could impact on a protected site, are preventing farmers from investing in more environmentally friendly infrastructure to meet regulatory requirements or apply

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<sup>1</sup> South West NFU, Farming in Designated Areas Survey, Spring 2020

for Government grant funding such as the Slurry Infrastructure Grant, for example through upgrading slurry stores. In addition, water abstraction licences for water to produce high value crops could be reduced or removed in a water catchment.

Whilst it is important to protect the environment, there is a finite amount of land available, and other important objectives, such as food production, need to be recognised. This needs to be part of new site designation decisions and consents. Viable farm businesses are needed to continue management of these sites and consent decisions should be cognisant of this.

### **3. How effective are wider policies, such as ELMSs, in supporting NFU members' efforts?**

The costs of managing a designated site or managing land close to the protected sites are borne by the farmer or land manager. There is no funding available because the land is designated, Government funding has to be accessed through the current Government offer. Therefore, it is important that designation is not a barrier to entering schemes such as ELMS which is an important source funding for land management practices which benefits protected sites.

Those already in agri-environment schemes on protected sites can find themselves in a difficult position. When the agreement is due to be rolled over for another five years it requires Natural England's SSSI consent. Natural England take the opportunity to require stock reductions, as currently seen in Dartmoor and there is no additional payment available. The NFU can share more information on the situation in Dartmoor with the Committee if required.

The indoor pig and poultry sector cannot claim agri-environment payments on their sheds, but where they are in the vicinity of a protected site which is sensitive to emissions (typically ammonia) they may be subject to more stringent conditions to limit their emissions, requiring more investment in technology. These losses cannot be replaced through other farming activity on that land and currently no compensation is being offered.

Although not substantial enough to mitigate losses, farmers in designated areas may be eligible for the **Future of Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL)** programme. In late 2022, the NFU consulted with regions and members to capture their experiences of FiPL which we would be happy to share with the Committee.

### **4. How could engagement with farmers and other land managers by the UK Government and relevant statutory bodies like Natural England regarding the management of protected areas be improved?**

The designation process should encourage early engagement with farmers and land managers, with discussions taking place before any formal designation process commences. Where sites are being designated, business impacts and the wider socio-economic context must be considered. There should be a joint understanding of the outcomes all parties need to achieve from that land.