

Wildlife and Countryside Link: Visions for Farming and Water in England
Parliamentary launch, 15 September 2015
Speech by Dr Elaine King, Director

May I start by thanking you, Zac, for hosting our event today.

We really appreciate your passion for the natural environment and your support for our work.

I'd also like to welcome our guest speakers, the Rt Honorable Liz Truss, Secretary of State for the Environment and Tim Farr, a farmer with huge experience of water and flood management and of working with nature.

And of course thank you all for joining us today. It's great to see people from such a wide range of backgrounds: famers, water companies, Government agencies, MPs and peers, Link member organisations and other NGOs.

We're here to launch two reports which represent our contribution to policy and practice on farming and water in England. We want to help value and restore nature for the benefit of people and wildlife. And we want to make clear our willingness to work in partnership with all stakeholders, including with Government and, Secretary of State, particularly with you and your colleagues.

Today's reports address a huge challenge – providing a healthy natural environment, valued for its own beauty, and also for what it provides for society and the economy, such as clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and protection from flooding.

And we know that our natural environment is in crisis. State of Nature told us that. So the question is how can we work together to improve things.

These two reports begin to set out the answers.

And their strength comes from the collective knowledge of Link's member organisations which is, in turn, informed by the working relationships that many of them have with key sectors, such as the water industry and farmers.

And, of course, some of our members themselves undertake extensive land and water management, and farming activities.

On behalf of our members, I would like to acknowledge the help of the farmers and water companies who have contributed to our thinking. I know some of you are here today and we appreciate your support.

So today we are celebrating some really fantastic work that is already underway. We also highlight where more needs to be done.

Hopefully, you will have seen the case studies that accompany our two reports.

I'd like to briefly highlight two farming examples, and Tim will be expanding on some with a water focus:

In Cumbria, advised by the Woodland Trust, the Lakes Free Range Egg Company has taken a simple environmental step: planting trees. The chickens are happier and healthier, the eggs are better, and

wildlife is thriving. Positive action for nature is clearly bringing benefits to animal welfare, business and wildlife.

I'm delighted that David Brass, chief executive of the business, is here with us this afternoon.

Working with farmers in the Mendip Hills, Somerset Wildlife Trust and FWAG South West have developed ways of getting a little more wildlife into a lot more of the landscape.

They have used a grass and flower seed mix to deliver modest enhancements in flower abundance and diversity in grass ley systems, whilst also retaining high levels of forage quality and productivity. The use of legume-and-herb-rich-swards is now an option in the new Countryside Stewardship Scheme thanks to this work.

The expectation is that this approach could make a real contribution to developing ecological networks across the farmed landscape.

These examples, and the other case studies that accompany them, demonstrate how investing in restoring the natural environment, is not only good for nature, but good for the economy, society and our health and well-being.

There's also clear evidence of the cost of getting it wrong. In the UK it costs 1.2 billion pounds every year to remove pollutants from our water to make it safe to drink. And we know the costs of soil degradation are just as significant.

We hope that the publication of these two reports today will start a new conversation with Government, the farming industry, water companies and others who can influence the future health of our natural environment.

And we have to get it right for the next generation. 13 year old Findlay Wilde made this point really clearly at the RSPB's summer reception last week. In a passionate and eloquent speech, Findlay reminded us that everything we have comes from the natural world.

Findlay asked us to consult his generation and, quite rightly, pointed out that no individual or group or organisation knows best, and we can all learn from each other by respecting and sharing our knowledge.

Secretary of State, we recognise that we all have a role to play and look forward to hearing your views on the part the Government can play in restoring nature.

We believe a key role will be to provide the leadership, ambition and delivery framework necessary to achieve our collective visions.

We're delighted that the Government is committed to developing a 25 year plan for Food and Farming and a 25 year plan for the environment.

We believe that embedding a strategic approach for nature in farming and food production is essential in achieving *farming fit for the future* and a *healthy water environment*.

We would be interested to hear how the Government proposes to integrate these two key initiatives, and involve all stakeholders in both processes.

Of course, this integration will be necessary to support the sustainable growth of one of the most significant business sectors in the UK – our farming industry – which relies totally on nature for its output.

Another opportunity to deliver multiple benefits comes at the end of this year, when you will sign off the management plans for all rivers, lakes and wetlands in the UK for the next 6 years.

While we have seen welcome improvements in elements of river health, still only 17% are currently at good health. We hope the Government will seize this opportunity to set out the ambition and action needed by all sectors and industries to improve the health of our precious freshwater environment.

And Secretary of State, your Department is also responsible for an amazing array of public benefits and is the custodian of our wonderful countryside and landscapes. These are benefits that don't appear in the bottom line.

We also hope the work you are taking forward with the Natural Capital Committee will help showcase the value of the work DEFRA does, and will support people and businesses that give back to nature.

We would be interested to hear how your ideas for all these new measures can inform decisions across Government.

Secretary of State, your Government has a tremendous opportunity to take really positive action for the environment that will benefit businesses - rural and urban - and the health and wellbeing of us all.

We look forward to working with you.