

Wildlife and
Countryside



FARMING FIT FOR THE FUTURE

www.farmingfitforthefuture.org.uk

OUR VISION

FARMING THAT IS...

Better for nature

A farmed landscape that is rich in wildlife, with healthy functioning and resilient ecosystems

Better for people

Approaches to food and farming that are fair to farmers and wider society, and which promote health and wellbeing for all

Better for our land and our livestock

Farms that look after and respect the land, and the farm animals on which we depend

Ready for the future

Farming and food production that can cope with the changes and challenges that lie ahead, as well as being able to capitalise on future opportunities

INTRODUCTION

The strength of support for Wildlife and Countryside Link's member organisations shows how much people value nature. Taken together, our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

As well as providing us with food, fuel and fibre, pollinating our crops, purifying our water and giving us green spaces for recreation, nature enriches our lives with its beauty and diversity. Farming shapes our countryside and everything that lives in it. We believe in a food and farming system that encourages nature and landscapes to thrive, supports livelihoods and local communities, and has public health and wellbeing and animal welfare at its heart.

Now is a pivotal point in the history of food, farming and our natural environment. The Government has ambitious plans for farming to deliver increased food production, investment and jobs. At the same time, many of our current approaches to food and farming are environmentally, economically and socially unsustainable. Our natural capital is being eroded at an alarming rate. A healthy natural environment will be key to delivering the Government's ambitions and to supporting farmers, their families and rural communities in the future.

The Government is developing both a long-term plan for nature's recovery and a long-term plan for food and farming. If the Government is to deliver its commitments on food, farming and the natural environment, these plans must be joined up and united around an ambition to protect and enhance the ecosystems that underpin sustainable farming - our soils, freshwater and natural habitats. Good environmental management of the farmed landscape is the only economically sustainable way forward for farming; it is critical to the health of the country's natural environment and to the health and wellbeing of its people. Here we set out a vision for farming that will deliver multiple benefits for farming communities and businesses, for nature and for the nation; in the immediate term and into the future. We look forward to discussing our ideas further with the Government, the farming community and other stakeholders, and working with them to help achieve and support farming that is truly fit for the future.

FARMING MATTERS

Farming covers 69% of land in England.¹ The ways in which we manage this land to produce food, fuel and fibre affect the quality and character of our countryside, the condition of our natural environment, the survival of wildlife on land and in our waters, and our own health and wellbeing.

Whilst rippling corn or green fields may spring to mind when thinking of agriculture in England, many of our upland landscapes are also farmed. As well as supporting iconic species and important habitats, our uplands play a key role in the provision of clean water, carbon storage and flood management.

Most farmers recognise that nature is vital to farming and to all of us, and many have a deep personal commitment to nature, landscapes and animal welfare. Unfortunately, however, the overall trend is one of dwindling wildlife and ongoing environmental degradation.

Farmers make business decisions influenced by a range of factors, including their own aspirations and principles, public policy and the markets in which they operate. Our taxes provide almost £2 billion to English farmers every year in the form of Common Agricultural Policy subsidies.² In addition, as consumers we all help to shape farming every time we buy food. Yet very little of the money invested in farming supports farmers in making good decisions for nature. The result is that farmers can be faced with an impossible choice between financial survival in the short-term, and looking after their land and wildlife for the longer-term. Damaging activities, such as poor soil management, pollution and the destruction or neglect of our special habitats and landscapes, continue.

We want farmers to be empowered to make decisions that are good for business, good for people and good for the natural environment.



FARMING COVERS
69% OF LAND
IN ENGLAND



WHY WE NEED TO **ACT NOW**

WARNING SIGNS FROM OUR ENVIRONMENT

Around a third of water pollution problems can be traced back to agriculture and rural land use.³ Over the past 50 years, intensive farming practices have damaged soil wildlife and degraded the quality of the soil on which our agriculture depends.⁴ Soil degradation in England and Wales costs farmers and wider society an estimated £1.2 billion per year in lost productivity, flood damage, reduced water quality and other costs.⁵

Of all the wild species that are monitored in the UK – including plants, birds, insects and mammals – three out of five have declined over the past 50 years.⁶ The cropland and grassland that produces our food is vital to the survival of many of these species, but the rich diversity of our farmland wildlife has diminished. For example, a quarter of the wildflower species that grow alongside arable crops are threatened with extinction, and 97% of traditionally managed lowland meadows, with their characteristic wealth of wild plants and animals, had disappeared by 1980. Declines in species and habitats should not be dismissed as a cost we must bear for producing food for a growing population: they are a key indicator of the poor health of the natural processes on which food production depends. We are running out of technical solutions for the problems we have caused by undermining the natural processes that support agriculture.

Prioritising increases in production over genuine sustainability risks driving further intensification of farming in ways which are bad both for the natural environment and for farmers. Furthermore, around 15 million tonnes of food is wasted annually in the UK food supply chain – by processors, retailers and households, amongst others.⁷ Wasted food represents a wasteful use of the valuable resources needed to produce it: we need to tackle this unnecessary cost to farmers, the environment and society.

SOIL DEGRADATION IN ENGLAND
AND WALES COSTS FARMERS
AND WIDER SOCIETY AN
ESTIMATED £1.2 BILLION PER YEAR



A CHALLENGING TIME FOR FARMERS

Viable farming depends on a healthy environment providing services such as soil fertility and pollination. Increasing production in the short-term is not necessary to meet our needs⁸, and the overproduction which we are currently seeing in some sectors drives down prices, making it harder for farmers to generate a profit.⁹ On the other hand, safeguarding our ability to continue to grow crops in the future is vital for food security. Soil degradation will seriously compromise current levels of crop production, and will make our ambitions to increase yields in the future impossible.

The current food system favours specialised farms producing commodities in large quantities. However, this practice of monoculture means that pests and diseases can occur at higher levels and need to be controlled, usually with pesticides. Pesticides can be costly for farmers and for the environment and, over time, they lose their effectiveness, as pests and disease organisms develop resistance.¹⁰ We are also facing declines in bees and other pollinators, which threaten the quality and quantity of future harvests of some crops.¹¹

For livestock farmers, perhaps more than others, volatility in commodity prices presents a major challenge, with prices often not meeting the costs of production, let alone the longer-term costs to the environment.

It is important to acknowledge the commercial value of approaches to farming that are sensitive to the natural environment, for example the productivity benefits that better soil stewardship can provide and the additional income available from diversification based on nature tourism. Many organic farmers have led the way in demonstrating the connection between food production and the natural environment. However, many of these benefits are not currently supported by the market, and farms that already support a wide range of species and a diversity of natural habitats tend to struggle financially under the current system. In the UK, these 'High Nature Value' farms are typically associated with extensive cattle and sheep grazing and are vital for wildlife, including many special, rare species, but they are poorly supported by public payments and are disappearing as farmers are forced to intensify production or sell up.¹²



WE ARE FACING DECLINES IN BEES AND OTHER POLLINATORS, WHICH THREATEN THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF FUTURE HARVESTS OF SOME CROPS

ANIMAL WELFARE CONCERNS

A desire for ever-better animal welfare has continued to be a driver of people's buying decisions. This has led to more than half of our eggs on sale being cage-free, and a third of pigs being kept in 'higher welfare' systems.

However, not all farming sectors have seen equal improvements. The UK produces around 14 million ducks a year,¹³ but consumers may be surprised to know that there is no legal requirement to provide ducks with water for anything other than drinking. When ducks are given access to open water they will perform a wide range of natural behaviours, such as sieving, dabbling, preening and head dipping.¹⁴ Despite this, very few commercial producers work to standards where the ducks have full body access to open water.

LOSING TOUCH WITH NATURE

In the UK, 30% of the natural processes that people benefit from – otherwise known as ecosystem services – are assessed as declining, and many others are in a degraded state.¹⁵ The health and wellbeing benefits of spending time with nature are well researched,¹⁶ yet people are ever more disconnected from the natural systems that provide the water we drink, the food we eat and the security of our livelihoods. Nowadays, fewer than 10% of children regularly play in wild places compared with 40% of children a generation ago.¹⁷ Even the paths, trails and other green spaces that enable us to explore nature are under threat from lack of funding.^{18, 19}

A BETTER FUTURE FOR FARMING

There is an urgent need for change and there are many challenges ahead. These include tackling climate change, ensuring we have thriving farms and rural communities, protecting and restoring distinctive wildlife-rich landscapes and avoiding the costs and risks of environmental damage. These challenges cannot be met unless we act now, and in a collective way, to restore the ecosystems that underpin a sustainable farming system. We will need to take targeted action on a large scale - for example to bring our soils back into good health, to restore and create resilient freshwater ecosystems, and to farm in ways that allow pollinators to thrive. Changing how we grow, sell and buy our food will benefit nature, agriculture, farm animals and people, now and in years to come.

WE WANT TO WORK
TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE
AND SUPPORT FARMING
THAT IS FIT FOR THE FUTURE





FARMING FIT FOR THE FUTURE

WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE?

OUR VISION EVERY FARM IS PLAYING ITS PART TO RESTORE AND CREATE HEALTHY SOILS, RIVERS, WETLANDS AND OTHER KEY HABITATS



Farming that's better for nature

A farmed landscape that is rich in wildlife, with healthy functioning and resilient ecosystems

- Farmers are actively sharing good practice and have the skills and confidence to farm in ways that nurture the services provided by nature and protect natural resources for future generations.
- Every farm is playing its part to restore and create the healthy soils, rivers, wetlands and other key habitats that support sustainable farming and a landscape rich in wildlife, with appropriate incentives for the sensitive management needed to achieve this.
- Farmland is part of a bigger, better and joined up ecological network that allows wildlife to move and adapt in response to climate change.
- Farming contributes to maintaining and improving the distinctive character and resilience of the countryside and the landscape features of local areas, along with promoting access for all.
- High Nature Value farming has a sustainable and vibrant future, and the multiple benefits these farms provide are properly recognised and valued.
- There is a clear focus on harnessing natural processes, such as incorporating organic matter in the soil and rebuilding soil structure, reducing dependence on artificial fertilisers and pesticides.

Farming that's better for people

Approaches to food and farming that are fair to farmers and wider society, and which promote health and wellbeing for all

- Everyone has access to clear, reliable and accurate information about what's in the food that we eat, where it has come from and how it was produced. Citizens are well-informed to make personal food choices based on health, provenance and environmental impact, as well as taste and price.
- Public funds are used effectively and transparently to support farming that delivers clear public benefits, such as protecting and enhancing wildlife and increasing opportunities for people to access the countryside and connect with nature.
- Productive farms, which work with the grain of the local environment, are contributing to sustainable jobs, thriving economies and flourishing local communities.
- A richer and more diverse food retail market supports more transparent, local and shorter food supply chains, delivering greater variety in the scale and types of food production. All businesses across the supply chain enjoy good working relationships and secure a fair share of the profits.



OUR VISION LOCAL AND SHORTER FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS, DELIVERING GREATER VARIETY IN THE SCALE AND TYPES OF FOOD PRODUCTION





OUR VISION LIVESTOCK SYSTEMS ARE DESIGNED WITH ANIMALS' NEEDS AT THEIR HEART



Farming that's better for our land and our livestock

Farms that look after and respect the land and the farm animals on which we depend

- Our land and waters are free from agricultural pollution, and abstraction of water for agriculture is within sustainable limits.
- Clear, fair and well-enforced regulation, coupled with new policy and market innovation, secures good land management and animal welfare.
- Livestock systems are designed with animals' needs at their heart, ensuring better outcomes for animal health and welfare.
- Farmers are supported, including through independent impartial advice, to undertake practices appropriate to local environmental conditions that renew soil health, halt soil erosion and pollution, and help reduce the threat of flooding to our homes.
- High Nature Value farms are better supported through the market and public policy, in order to secure the special benefits that they provide to society.

Farming that's ready for the future

Farming and food production that can cope with the changes and challenges that lie ahead, as well as being able to capitalise on future opportunities

- Government and industry policies are focussed on feeding people sustainably and looking after our natural assets for the long-term, rather than maximising short-term food production at all costs.
- Farmers are playing their full part in the response to climate change, with a significant overall reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.
- The farmed landscape supports a network of healthy ecosystems, helping the natural environment to adapt to climate change.
- The use of non-renewable resources in farming, such as fossil fuels, has been replaced with sustainable alternatives.
- Sustainable farming systems ensure resilience to future change, and protect and enhance the natural resources and processes on which farming and wider society depends.



OUR VISION THE FARMED LANDSCAPE SUPPORTS A NETWORK OF HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS, HELPING THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE



SOME KEY STEPS FOR LONG TERM CHANGE

Here we set out how existing and new mechanisms could be used more effectively to achieve the outcomes we want to see. This is less a list of detailed policy recommendations, but more intended to be the start of a conversation between the Government, the farming community and civil society.

Embed long-term planning for nature's recovery in future approaches to farming. Ensure that the development and implementation of a long-term plan to protect and recover nature is firmly embedded in future approaches to farming and food production.

Make the Common Agricultural Policy fit for purpose. Reform the CAP so that public money goes to farmers who manage their land in ways that optimise the production of public goods.

Make regulation more effective. Ensure the importance and benefits of effective regulation are more widely recognised. Regulation should be well designed and effectively enforced to ensure strong protection of the natural environment, human health and animal welfare.

Make taxes work harder for the public good. The tax system must incentivise good farming practices and not place barriers in the way of innovation.

Recognise the true value of the natural environment.

Stimulate innovation in the way we capture the value of our environment in public policy and consumer decision-making, by engaging wider industry and through facilitating new markets to generate funding and income for the countryside.

Inform and educate the public on healthy and sustainable diets.

Provide clear consumer guidance, require better labelling and expand the scope of government procurement standards. Make food, farming, health and nature a part of every child's education.

Invest more in research and knowledge exchange.

Step up investment in research, training and knowledge exchange on farming that is truly economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. Use the best available evidence to guide policy, set industry standards and monitor outcomes.

Promote a thriving sustainable food chain.

Through planning and business policy, promote a highly diverse retail and food service sector that promotes and supports the local production and consumption of high quality, high welfare, fairly-traded and sustainably produced food.

SUMMARY

It is clear that much needs to change if we are to achieve ‘farming fit for the future’. We urgently need to see progress in the following key areas:

- Fairness and transparency in the supply chain
- Halting declines in wildlife and protecting and enhancing nature across the farmed landscape
- Protection, recovery and enhancement of natural resources including soil and water
- Improving animal welfare across all sectors
- Empowering citizens to make healthy and sustainable food choices
- Enabling citizens to enjoy the benefits of access to and connection with the natural environment
- Securing a better economic future for farming businesses and rural communities, founded on sustainable practices that work with nature
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to a changing climate

ENABLING CITIZENS TO ENJOY THE BENEFITS OF ACCESS TO AND CONNECTION WITH THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together 45 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife, countryside and the marine environment. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity.

This vision is supported by the following organisations:



Many of the organisations within the Link coalition own and manage their own land through partnerships with local farmers and graziers. The organisations involved in creating Link’s vision for farming collectively:

- Manage over 525,000 hectares of land of which over 258,000 ha are farmed
- Provide advice and guidance to a range of farmers and landowners on the creation of more wildlife-friendly habitats, increasing the awareness of voluntary schemes and maximising the delivery of wider public benefits
- Employ or engage with approximately 10,000 landowners and farmers
- Are represented on the key Defra and Natural England agriculture stakeholder groups