**Nature is valuable in its own right and is also vital to our long-term economic prosperity and our individual wellbeing. It sustains us with fertile soil and provides water and pollinators for our crops. But the natural world is in long term decline. Urgent action is required and as 70% of the UK’s land area is farmed, agricultural policy is vital to this.**

**KEY INFORMATION**

**94%
of the population recognise the importance of natural places.**(*Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment, 2018*)

**£1.2bn
Annual cost of soil degradation in England and Wales.**

(Defra, “Total Costs of Soil Degradation in England and Wales” 5, no. 207, 2009)

**97%
of wildflower meadows have been lost in the UK since the Second World War.**(*Natural England, 2011*)

**Individuals with easy access to nature are**

**40%**

**less likely to become overweight or obese.**

(Wells et al 2007, Bowler et al., 2010)

**31**

**Wildlife Trust working farms**

**>5,000**

**Farmers & land managers advised each year by Wildlife Trust advisors**

**7,500**

**Livestock owned & used for conservation grazing across Wildlife Trusts**

**98,500ha
Land owned by The Wildlife Trusts**

The Wildlife Trusts welcomes the direction of travel set out in the Agriculture Bill with powers to fund the delivery of public goods. To ensure it truly supports the recovery of nature we, alongside Greener UK, are calling for the Bill to:

1. Ensure guaranteed long-term funding at the scale required to meet current and future environmental commitments and wider Government ambition.
2. Include duties, rather than simply powers, for Ministers to further the maintenance, recovery and restoration of the natural environment.
3. Establish specific, legally-binding targets to drive the recovery of nature.
4. Ensure that payments for improving productivity are conditional on safeguarding environmental outcomes.
5. Maintain high standards in trade.
6. Link payments to compliance with basic standards of land management.

There is an economic imperative to improve and maintain our country’s natural infrastructure – our rivers, woodlands, peat bogs, meadows - our natural capital. This cannot be done through the open market so there is a strong case for government intervention. Farmers, though, can sell the food they grow through the market and they should not be subsidised for this. Previous efforts to subsidise the growing of food were environmentally damaging.Instead there should be substantial and guaranteed funding in ecological recovery which gives confidence to farmers to invest in modern sustainable production for which they are then fairly rewarded for by the market.

The Agriculture Bill should be aligned with the forthcoming Environment Bill to lay the foundations for a new approach to land management which would support the recovery of nature including through the creation of Nature Recovery Networks.

**Our key amendments explained**

**1. Long-term and substantial funding**

Crucial to the success of the Government’s proposed new Environmental Land Management system will be guaranteed long-term funding which is set at the level required to deliver its ambition to leave the environment in a better state for the next generation. Farmers need to be paid adequately for managing their land to deliver these public goods.

A report by The Wildlife Trusts, National Trust and RSPB found that at least £2.3 billion a year is required to ensure the UK meets it current environmental land management commitments. A multi-annual budget therefore is required which is based on an assessment of need.

The EFRA Committee, in its recent report on the Agriculture Bill, was concerned at the lack of clarity on long-term funding beyond 2022 and called for the Bill to be amended[[1]](#endnote-1):

*“It is reasonable to expect the Government to outline a long-term financial commitment to agriculture. The Government should amend the Bill to require it to establish a multiannual financial framework before the agricultural transition period commences.”*

**2. Duty to act not just powers**

The Agriculture Bill is an enabling piece of legislation with few duties on Government. To provide greater certainty to farmers and land managers the Bill should contain requirements on the Government to translate its vision into policy – including a requirement to further the maintenance, recovery and restoration of the natural environment through an Environmental Land Management Scheme.

**3. New ambitious targets for nature’s recovery**

Fundamental to reversing the fortunes of our wildlife, as well as ensuring the delivery of the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan in England, will be the introduction of new ambitious legally-binding targets covering clean air and water, healthy soils, public access to high-quality natural green spaces, connected and quality habitats and abundant wildlife including pollinators.

The Agriculture Bill should require the Government to develop and set specific, measurable and timebound environmental land management targets to deliver this ambition. These could set the path towards the Environment Bill.

The Environment Audit Committee, in its report on the 25 Year Environment Plan, supported the call for new targets[[2]](#endnote-2):

*“If the Plan is to have any chance of delivering its overarching ambitions, it requires targets against which the Government’s progress can be judged by Parliament and the public. We want to see the Government’s ambitions for environmental recovery set out clearly and explicitly… the Government should bring forward specific, measurable and achievable targets across the 25 Year Plan’s aims.”*

**4. Sustainable productivity improvement payments**

The Bill enables financial assistance to start or improve the productivity of agriculture, horticulture or forestry activities, for example for precision machinery for applying fertiliser. Support for enhancing productivity should only be made for activities which deliver equivalent or improved environmental outcomes, i.e. for sustainable production. Otherwise payments could be made for activities which damage the environment such as mass planting of Sitka spruce which may improve financial productivity in the short term, but which damage the environment.

**5. Trade**
It is vital that any future trade deals do not allow the import of products produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards otherwise this could undermine domestic protections in the UK.

The EFRA Committee has called for the Bill to be amended to protect against lower standards[[3]](#endnote-3):

*“The Government should put its money where its mouth is and accept an amendment to the Agriculture Bill stipulating that food products imported as part of any future trade deal should meet or exceed British standards relating to production, animal welfare and the environment.”*

**6. Regulatory baseline and compliance**

The Agriculture Bill says little about regulation beyond the ability to establish an enforcement and inspection regime for new financial assistance payments. It should be clear that receipt of public payments is dependent on adhering to regulatory standards.

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*For more information on this briefing, please contact Russell Cooper, Public Affairs Manager* *rcooper@wildlifetrusts.org*

1. EFRA Committee – 10th Report – Scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill – Paragraph 29, November 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Environment Audit Committee – 8th Report – The Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan – Paragraph 24, July 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. EFRA Committee – 10th Report – Scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill – Paragraph 36, November 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)