



The
Wildlife
Trusts

Food Security and Farming in a Nature and Climate Crisis

A Briefing from The Wildlife Trusts



Introduction

Our current global food production system is devastating our planet's natural systems, both on land and at sea. It is no secret that intensive agriculture in the UK is a major cause of nature loss and river pollution, but it is also failing our farmers who are being buffeted by the increasingly tangible impacts of a changing climate, exposure to volatile supply chains, and inflationary pressures on agricultural inputs.

Farmers up and down the UK face increasingly harsh economic conditions, with many heavily reliant on public subsidies to remain viable businesses whilst trying to compete with the import of food produced to lower environmental standards from abroad as a result of international trade deals which do nothing for UK growers.

This is a broken and unfair system. Further intensification is often seen as a path to greater profitability and resilience, but this is a false route to business sustainability. Rather than support farm businesses, continued intensification will drive further nature decline and mean the problems created by climate change are intensified by degraded habitats, poor soils, and declines in beneficial insect populations. The way land is currently managed to produce food is contributing to the very biodiversity and climate crises that undermine its long-term viability, and undermine the basis of farm profitability.

However, there is a better way. Despite these challenges, many farmers are already adopting nature-centric approaches to sustainable food production. Farmland accounts for 69% of land use in the UK¹ and this presents a huge opportunity for farmers to play a critical role in securing nature and climate recovery whilst avoiding pollution and increasing nutritional food security.

However, there must be a fundamental shift away from industrial agricultural practices towards an approach which sees farming and the environment as mutually beneficial and interdependent – systemic changes are needed.

This policy briefing sets out the changes that The Wildlife Trusts believe are needed to achieve a sustainable, resilient, nature-positive and climate-neutral food system in the UK.

1. Farmers must be empowered to tackle the Climate and Nature Emergencies

The UK Government should support farmers with policies which embed agroecological and regenerative farming practices across all farm businesses. These are urgently needed to provide farmers with the tools they need to adapt to climate change and manage resilient businesses, moving away from intensive farming and its reliance on fossil-fuel based agrochemicals to provide soil nutrients, support crop development, and manage pests and disease. In many cases farmers should be supported to phase out altogether the costly use of agrochemicals, reducing business spend and improving profitability².

By working with nature, farmers can enhance the natural assets on their land, providing flood water storage, carbon capture, or other measures which contribute to society's climate resilience. Building soil health is key to many of these outcomes, preventing soil degradation which has been calculated to cost the economy £1.2 billion every year across England and Wales³.

- Significantly expand agricultural advice with the creation of a Nature-Positive Farming Advisory Service to support farmers to access new payment schemes.
- Review the Sustainable Farming Incentive – embed a whole farm approach, and provide a clear ladder of ambition for a transition to climate-neutral and nature-friendly farming.
- Ensure farmers with high ambition for nature or climate, including approaches like organic, are justly rewarded through Countryside Stewardship and the Landscape Recovery scheme.
- Ensure the agriculture budget is being well spent and provides the scale of investment needed to secure the environmental public goods society demands and to achieve net zero⁴.



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1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agricultural-land-use-in-the-united-kingdom/agricultural-land-use-in-united-kingdom-at-1-june-2022>

2 https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Farming%20at%20the%20Sweet%20Spot_1.pdf

3 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0921800915003171>

4 <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Finance%20for%20UK%20Environmental%20Land%20Management%2C%20June%202023.pdf>

2. Government must secure a sustainable & resilient Food System

Healthy soils, clean and plentiful water, and thriving insect populations are the foundation of our farming system – yet are threatened by climate change and ecological breakdown, which represent the greatest threat to UK food security⁵. Significant impacts on food production are already evident. The long, sweltering summer of 2023, the warmest on record, saw onion yields down 40%, carrot yields down 25% and potato yields down 20%. £8bn of UK food imports are also threatened by worsening floods, droughts and heatwaves⁶, and without urgent action to address the climate and biodiversity crises, these risks will only increase.

Pitting food production against nature is a dangerous distraction. The UK Food Security Report states that *“Food security rests ultimately not on maximising domestic production... but on making best use of land types”*. Around 40% of farms will need to be in higher ambition environmental schemes to halt the loss of species abundance by 2030.

- Put in place a Soil Health Action Plan for England with the ambition to ensure 100% of agricultural soils are in sustainable management.
- Adopt a Land Use Framework to help to manage the competing pressures on land, with a key focus on farmed land in relation to food, nature, and climate mitigation.
- Regulate supply chains and markets and build nature and diversification into domestic production, to help deliver healthy food by creating a more resilient food system

3. A just transition to deliver public services & strong rural economies

An effective, well designed and ambitious future for rural communities will unlock exciting avenues for innovation, jobs and growth. All of the credible models for achieving net zero propose land use changes for nature to some degree⁷, requiring that some land is partly or wholly removed from agricultural production and restored for nature to sequester carbon. This presents an opportunity to reinvigorate nature-depleted and socially-isolated rural communities, generating vibrant and nature-rich local economies.

New employment opportunities, from agroforestry and natural capital advice to new local marketing, could create 10,000 jobs in the short-term and a further 15,000 in the long-term, and place the UK Government on track to meet key climate, biodiversity, tree planting, sustainable farming and wellbeing targets⁸. More local and regional sustainable food systems, which can better support farmers, could create ~200,000 more jobs according to work by the RSPB and Sustain⁹.

- Ensure a just transition for farmers and workers through the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes, with new resources for advice and skills training.
- Create significant new job opportunities by boosting higher-ambition farming & landscape-scale nature-recovery schemes, with a specific uptake target of at least 3,000 Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier and Landscape Recovery agreements per year.
- Develop a whole food systems approach, providing the necessary infrastructure and markets for farmers to process and sell their produce in local communities, leading to new employment opportunities and enhancing farmer profit.



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5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021>

6 <https://eciu.net/analysis/reports/2023/climate-impacts-on-uk-food-imports>

7 see <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/sixth-carbon-budget/> and <https://www.iddri.org/en/project/net-zero-agriculture-2050>

8 https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Letter_presenting_compendum_2.pdf

9 <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/jul21-local-food-report-jobs/>

4. Stronger protections for people and nature

Water pollution is one of the greatest and most widespread threats to species and habitats in the UK, including those within protected areas. In England and Wales, only 14% and 46% of rivers respectively meet the standards for good ecological status, largely as a consequence of intensive agricultural practices and excess nutrients.

Too often, this is driven by large profiteering agri-corporations which exploit weak regulatory protections, putting short-term profit ahead of long-term sector sustainability. Not only does this contribute to the appalling state of our rivers, but it undercuts those farm businesses which are playing by the rules. A fair and robust regulatory baseline would also result in better value for money for taxpayers, compared to paying for very basic 'good-practice' actions in ELM schemes.

Fair regulation should include greater focus on supply chains, food traders, manufacturers, and large retailers to ensure farmers are not given unnecessary demands and receive a fair return from the market (a £120bn food sector).

- Set a fair but firm baseline for all farm businesses, to make polluting businesses pay for the damage they cause, and to create a level playing field to ensure those farmers who are doing more for nature are not undermined.
- Plug the gap left by the end of cross compliance¹⁰, by copying existing EU standards on Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions into domestic law.
- Ensure appropriate resourcing and funding to properly monitor and robustly enforce against the regulatory baseline.
- Strongly regulate supply chains – through enhancing the Groceries Supply Code of Practice and Grocery Code Adjudicator powers, and by promptly introducing new sector based rules anticipated in the Agriculture Act 2020 to remove abusive supplier practices and unnecessary specifications and supply demands.

5. Implement progressive food policies for people and farmers

Implementing key recommendations from Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy Review¹¹ will help farmers to unlock fair rewards from the market, and improve access to healthy, sustainably-produced food. A widespread shift towards more sustainable dietary choices is recognised as vital to outcomes for public health, nature's recovery, and carbon reduction.

Introduce a new National Food Strategy to ensure a coherent approach to supplying sustainable, healthy and fairly traded food for all.

- Ensure all public sector food procurement policies support healthier, nature and climate friendly diets by sourcing food from nature-friendly farming systems.
- Develop clear minimum standards for imports, to ensure British farmers are not undercut by imports produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards.
- Introduce legislation for mandatory food labelling¹² that empowers individuals to make healthier and sustainable dietary choices, supports businesses to make more sustainable sourcing decisions, and incentivises farmers and producers to be a part of the change.

6. Embrace responsible innovation

New technologies, such as ones which bolster crop resilience to climate change, can help the UK improve food security and achieve climate & nature outcomes, but they will not be a "silver bullet" to solving the complex issues currently faced by our food and farming systems. If novel technologies are utilised to further increase intensification of the farmed environment, they will serve only to exacerbate existing problems in our food systems.

- Champion a transparent, evidence-based approach to decision-making on innovation in farming and food, founded on the Precautionary Principle.
- Ensure decisions on research and development spend prioritise society's and farmers' needs.



BARN OWL © JON HAWKINS

¹⁰ <https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Post-EU-exit-Regulatory-Framework-Final-Jan-2020.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/>

¹² <https://www.clearfoodlabeluk.org/>

The Wildlife Trusts are a federated movement of 46 charities, supported by a central charity, the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts. Together we have more than 900,000 members, 35,000 volunteers and 3,000 staff across the UK. We share a vision of nature in recovery, with abundant, diverse wildlife and natural processes creating wilder landscapes where people and nature thrive.



Wildlife Trusts care for – and have restored – some of the most special places for wildlife in the UK. Collectively we manage more than 2,300 nature reserves, operate 123 visitor and education centres and own 29 working farms. We undertake research, we stand up for wildlife and wild places under threat, and we help people access nature.

We work with businesses who are committed to being nature positive and take action to help restore 30% of land and seas for nature by 2030.

The Wildlife Trusts

 enquiry@wildlifetrusts.org

 wildlifetrusts.org

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