

Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership
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To:

Environmental Audit Committee inquiry on the
Future of the Natural Environment after the EU
Referendum.

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Your Ref : Future of the Natural Environment
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Correspondence\2016\September

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Dear Sirs,

Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum

Please find the Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership response below.

Yours sincerely

Mike Kelly

Natural Environment Officer

What are the implications for UK biodiversity of leaving the EU, in particular the Common Agricultural Policy? To what extent do initiatives to support biodiversity in the UK depend on CAP-related payments? What risks and opportunities could developing our own agri-environment policy and funding present?

1. This should be an opportunity to reshape agri-environment policy address the past failures and help mend our broken ecosystems. CAP-related payments represent the greatest financial contribution to conserving UK biodiversity but they have only delivered limited successes and on the whole UK biodiversity continues to decline at an unsustainable rate. Continuing with the current model is unsustainable and represents both an environmental risk and an economic risk to the natural systems underpinning UK agriculture.
2. Therefore, UK agri-environment policy should be better integrated with UK economic policy as at the present the value of most ecosystem services are currently omitted from national and local economic structures. We would argue that "paid ecosystem services" through restructured agri-environment initiatives are an opportunity, which would reduce reliance on "end of pipe solutions" and as such has the potential to be self-funding and therefore a win-win situation for both farmers and the natural environment.
3. Leaving the EU represents a risk to the network of European Protected Sites in the UK. These sites represent our most exceptional ecology and ensuring continued, and we also argue strengthened protection is essential.

How should future support for UK agriculture be structured in order to ensure there are incentives for environmentally-friendly land management? What are the positives/negatives of current schemes (e.g. Countryside Stewardship) that should be retained/avoided?

4. The Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of the UK covers 70% of land in the UK¹. Clearly the future of many of our terrestrial and freshwater protected species and their habitats are intrinsically linked with agriculture and effective delivery of “environmentally-friendly” land management through agri-environment schemes.
5. However, we are concerned that current incentives are failing to deliver “environmentally-friendly” land management at scale that is necessary to arrest and reverse declines in biodiversity. The State of Nature Report (2013)² published by 25 of the leading nature organisations in the UK has charted the decline of species across the UK in recent decades. According to this report, 60% of species have declined in recent decades and one in 10 species are at risk of disappearing all together from the UK. Defra’s England Natural Environment Indicators report (2016)³ has shown that 213 priority species for which data is available had declined to 33 per cent of the 1970 population.
6. Locally, we have seen the continued decline in the conservation status of one of our most important protected sites (a Natura 2000 site) and some of our waterbodies continue to fail to achieve “good status” as required by the Water Framework Directive (WFD). The protection of our most precious sites can only be achieved if agri-environment schemes deliver at a catchment or landscape scale. Currently they are unable to do so due to lack of financial resources, fragmented implementation and the elective nature of such agreements. The Natural Environment White Paper - The Natural Choice⁴, stresses that “*what is needed is a step-change in nature conservation*”. Implementing properly incentivised and resourced agri-environment agreements are fundamental to achieving this.
7. Currently there is little incentive to take up options in the right places or in the right combinations to deliver best results. Popular options such as hedgerow management have taken a disproportionate amount of the agri-environment budget at the expense of more beneficial options.
8. Furthermore, the benefits delivered by agri-environment agreements are reliant on the quality of advice given. The “hands-off” approach applied to ELS and HLS and latterly for CS mid-tier agreements potentially exacerbates point 7 above.
9. Recently the end of ESA schemes in the Shropshire Hills has seen a break in the continuity of incentivised schemes. No longer constrained by these schemes, this break has allowed opportunities for some land managers to undertake unsustainable practices such as the ploughing of permanent pasture, effectively undoing 25 years of public investment in the landscape.
10. To achieve this step-change, we believe that agri-environment incentives should proportionally compensate those farmers that deliver the greatest societal, ecosystem, resource protection benefits. This is particularly important in the uplands where land is often marginal and requires ‘improvement’ to increase its viability. The uplands of the Shropshire Hills AONB are a mosaic of small family farms and currently the level of upland payments do not encourage farmers to explore alternative and more sustainable practices to deliver wider societal benefits such as natural flood management, carbon sequestration etc.
11. We do however, recognise the potential value of agri-environment schemes and believe that in Shropshire Hills AONB 25 years of the ESA scheme (Clun and Shropshire Hills) and other classic schemes (CS and HLS) has engendered a more sustainable farming culture and that they are valued by landowners due to long-term and ongoing agreements.
12. AONB’s have a track record of working at a landscape scale. We suggest that AONB management plans become be a key driver for shaping local agri-environment schemes. This approach would help support the Lawton principles of a ‘bigger, better, more, joined’ natural environment.

¹ Defra (2016). Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2015

² RSPB (2013). State of Nature

³ Accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-natural-environment-indicators>

⁴ Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228842/8082.pdf

How should future UK agri-environment support be administered, and what outcomes should it focus on?

13. Those farms practicing intensive agriculture should be required to engage in “Sustainable Intensive Agriculture” as a minimum. We would argue that all farming should be sustainable and that delivering this fundamental goal should not be reliant on incentive payments. To help deliver the step-changes described in the Natural Environment White Paper we propose a proportionate transfer of funds from the Basic Payment Scheme to properly resource and incentivise UK agri-environment schemes (see point 6 above).
14. Scheme outcomes should focus on:
 - Achieving landscape complexity
 - Achieving climate change adaptation and resilience
 - Safeguarding carbon in upland peat soils
 - Encouraging carbon sequestration from restored wet heath and woodland creation
 - Protecting communities through lower flood risk and better water storage
 - Improved water quality and riparian habitats through erosion control/ecosystem buffering
 - Delivering ecosystem/biodiversity function at landscape/catchment scale
15. We also believe that regulation is generally too weak and fragmentary to achieve meaningful conservation results in a changing landscape. We therefore suggest that those elements of Cross-Compliance regulation that focus on resource and water quality protection would be better handled by the Environment Agency rather than the RPA.

What are the prospects and challenges for future environmental stewardship schemes in the devolved administrations? How much divergence in policy between the nations of the United Kingdom is likely? How can divergence be managed?

16. If there is to be any divergence in policy it should reflect the inherent differences in the climatic and topographic regions of the UK. Ecosystems do not respect political boundaries and national policies should be designed to work at an ecosystem scale. Upland Shropshire has more in common with upland Wales than coastal Norfolk. Therefore Environmental Stewardship should be tailored to fit local needs and national policies should be designed to reflect this.

What are the future risks and opportunities to innovative land practices, such as managed rewilding? What role can rewilding play in conservation and restoration of habitats and wildlife? What evidence is there to support the incentivising of such schemes in any new land management policies?

17. Rewilding is a worthy aim and it may be appropriate to use this terminology in some parts of the UK, but it is a provocative term within the farming community. We believe many of the aspirations of “rewilding” can be achieved through the delivery of paid ecosystem services as previously described.

Ends