

CPRE Shropshire:

“What next for our farming, food and landscape?”

Conference notes: Friday 3rd March 2017, Shrewsbury

Christopher Price, CLA: What a food, farming and environmental policy could provide. Post Brexit Support for farming

- CLA members represent 50% of the managed/owned land in England
- Defra is much more important now than pre-Brexit; Andrea Leadsom and George Eustice, as ardent Brexiteers, have a huge personal vested interest in getting it right. They are keen to include Natural England in decision making.
- Key to positive decision making is that everything the farming community asks for must be ‘legitimate’, i.e. in the public interest, and also value for money.
- Farmers must make a ‘business case’ when asking the Treasury for money (analogy of a plumbing business).
- Following the Great Repeal Bill (Gerbil), the Government has decided to lift the entire body of European agricultural and environmental legislation as it is, make it UK law, then reform it over the years following Brexit.
- Operable regulations can be easily transferred, e.g. CAP, birds and habitat directive etc. Inoperable regulations are more complicated, for example crop protection regulations and fisheries legislation as they involve both European and international co-operation.
- The Environmental Green Paper is well advanced; the farming Green Paper is much more difficult due to devolution.
- Defra is concerned about the wide range of productivity across Britain’s farmers. Also farming resilience – as there is too much volatility at present.
- Animal welfare issues across trading boundaries will also be a concern.
- Farming underpins everything that happens in the countryside, particularly in the uplands and the more remote areas. Farmers *must* be supported as they affect everything from water purity and leisure access to tree planting to absorb carbon emissions.

Clare Cole, Natural England: Natural England in Shropshire

- 1118 live ES (Environmental Scheme) agreements in Shropshire, covering 112,772ha of land, 23,901ha of which is under HLS (Higher Level Stewardship)
- 588 agreements refer to hedgerow management, 495 to managing permanent grassland and 252 to pasture management.

- We all need to be better advocates for everything the natural environment provides from water to air quality. We need to be more creative as to how we use land, for example for flood prevention, for food production.
- The future is to recognise and support 'multifunctional farming':
 - Food production
 - Wild life diversity
 - Water purification
 - Flood prevention
 - Leisure
 - Well being and health
 - Landscape and beauty

Mark Measures, Farming Adviser: Soil, Food and the Environment

- Land owners need to be more mindful of how we manage the actual soil on which we grow our food, whether crops or pasture for animals.
- Cereal yields have reached a plateau; nitrogen fertiliser use efficiency is only 50%; less than 2% of soil is organic matter
- The way farmers produce food affects the quality of food which affects health, which ultimately affects the NHS
- Agro-ecology is needed to effect a fundamental shift in land management

Joy Greenall, Shropshire Hill Farmer: Small organic mixed farming in the South Shropshire Hills

- Farms Hereford sucklers and Clun Forest sheep on 139 acre family upland farm near Clun, in organic HLS scheme
- Farm house at 800ft up, top field at 1350ft and ploughed as it's the only flat field
- Shropshire farms very variable because of varied underlying geology
- Some fields enclosed only 120 years ago, some of the latest enclosure in the country
- One species rich hay meadow has over 100 species
- Nature conservation is at the core of farming
- For many farmers, the subsidy is the income
- Inter-related local economy: during the year they employ 20 people and trade with 35 businesses
- After Brexit? – If we want a beautiful landscape it must be paid for. That won't be via food, so it must be via subsidy.

Simon Latter, NFU adviser: Farming in North Shropshire

- Machines currently being insured are more about working with the land. Larger is not necessarily better
- Bigger machines need bigger buildings
- Labour – skilled, safe employees needed, and more technology. Contract farming agreements are common

- Better management means economy of scale, more attention to Human Resources and Health & Safety
- Specialist enterprises common e.g. carrot growing
- Diversifying enterprises and risk is necessary e.g. biogas, solar
- Brexit will take time; farmers need to plan for uncertainty; but Government should provide certainty and consistency, not a cliff edge

Liam Bell, Gamekeeper and National Gamekeepers Association: Landscape, conservation and shooting, the rural economy

- Shoots have shaped the landscape since the 1850s (woodcock first recorded then)
- Wetland created on arable reversion was for duck, shot lightly on rough days. Produced 2.2 fledged lapwing chicks per pair, but only with magpie control
- Millet for pheasants and partridges was also great for many species of finch
- Soft fruit had been removed and the partridge left. Now re-introducing grey partridge on 4 tenanted farms over 1,600 acres, using 6m field margins. All tenants are keen (and have had rent reductions). Margins also encourage barn owls (owl boxes had been nested in by stock doves)
- Partridge chicks eat only insects for first 10 days of life

Cath Landles, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership liaison officer: Landscape, communities and education in the Shropshire Hills

- The 1958 designation of the AONB covers a quarter of Shropshire
- John Muir Award – Connecting schools to their local landscape - Discover, Explore, Conserve, Share
- Down to Earth in the Clun Forest - Community Landscape Project
- Land, Life & Livelihoods group - set up to tackle local issues together

Graeme Willis, Agricultural Adviser CPRE, National Office

Bill Bryson wrote in 2012: “Where I come from, when the landscape is stunning, it’s because **nature** made it that way. In England when it’s stunning, it is, more often than not, because **farming** made it that way”.

One thing we can all agree on is that farming is vital to the management of the landscape.

Though landscape is central to many people’s enjoyment of and valuing of the countryside we need to go further than this. We can take it as understood that the farmer’s vocation is to produce food; we can also take it as understood that farmers need to run a successful business – BUT in so doing, good farming and good stewardship of land does many other things:

- It creates inspirational landscapes we can escape to and escape in.
- It provides a home and food for wildlife that has evolved alongside our farming over millennia

- It filters and store water,
- It locks carbon in organic matter in soils helping to prevent climate change

Put these altogether – a secure supply of food and water, regulation of our climate and extremes of weather, access to wildlife and tranquil countryside as our natural health service; these multiple services or benefits are often termed ‘multi-functional farming.’

I suspect most of us here would agree with what I’ve heard called ‘agricultural exceptionalism’, i.e. that we need to treat farming as a special case. BUT not everyone agrees and it’s not yet clear that the Government agrees.

For that reason Brexit poses major risks for the future of farming:

1 There are great uncertainties about what kind of trade deals Britain will secure in the short and medium term: we’ll be out of the single market and the customs union and potentially falling back on WTO rules and heavy tariffs on some agricultural products.

2 Britain may strike trade deals which trade off farming to secure access elsewhere for our finance or car or defence or aviation industries; this could mean cheap imports at much lower standards, undercutting our farmers and driving many out of business or our standards down

3 Government is battling with budget pressures – this week alone we heard of cuts to the NHS, schools, the care system and the police – the Treasury may well be intent on clawing back some or most of the £3billion invested last year through the CAP in the UK which represented 55% of farming income.

Defra figures from 2005 to 2014 show a fall in commercial farms in England from 132,400 to 102,900 in a decade, a fall of just under 31000 or 23% with almost all those losses in the under 50 ha categories

Even with CAP support it is perfectly possible to imagine a very different mix of farms and farm sizes in a decade or two.

But, post Brexit and without significant Government action:

- many farms could go under in this new reality
- many farms could merge and others disappear
- the sector could change dramatically and the countryside alongside it

So where does this leave us? The Government is working on its 25 year plans for Food and Farming and for the Natural Environment - to set the compass for a generation for the industry; we expect consultation this spring and it is thus a critical time to influence the Government as it shapes its post Brexit policy.

National CPRE’s position is that we need to:

-retain and support a diverse, sustainable and resilient farming industry – diverse in size, ownership and ideally adapted to place and landscape and protective of nature, culture, landscape and heritage.

- we need markets to be shaped and developed to support this kind of diverse, sustainable and resilient farming and Government to lead in this.

- we also need public investment to pay for what the market will never pay for over the longer term and for farming to transition to the viable, resilient and environmentally sustainable industry it needs to be for the future

None of this is easy and yet it is imperative that we have a vision of how we want agriculture to look in the post Brexit future and we need a clear sense of how to get there.

My final point is that we need to put that vision and road map together and carry it across to Government. Fundamental to this at this critical time is to reconcile differences between farming and the environment - we need to work hard to align our positions better and work for a common cause.

CPRE can play an important role in making this possible. As a conservation group, perhaps unlike some of the wildlife groups, we differentiate between the environment and the countryside. We care about the environment: natural resources, nature water, air, soil and wildlife / biodiversity BUT we also care about the countryside itself which of necessity includes these but has the additional goals of thriving rural economies and communities and the human lived experience of the countryside and quality of life.

So we want farming working with nature to enable the countryside as a whole to thrive. We do need to mobilise, collectively and individually – especially in the Shires - call or write to your MP - tell them how important farming is for the economy, for rural communities and for the countryside; better still get them to your farm and show them.

Plenary Session

- Intensive farming not necessarily bad, e.g. “Woodland” eggs. UK model is to have farming and environmental benefit on the same land, rather than the US model of separate prairies and national parks
- New Zealand is very different from here and is not an analogy for Brexit Don’t use NZ as a model for what might happen here.
- Public benefits provided by farmers, including public access, landscape management, flood prevention, carbon capture, etc should be rewarded. At present, all they get paid for is producing food. Natural England should help shape the post-Brexit policy
- We need to work together to provide farmers with a decent living while doing the best for all of us.

- No till or minimum till had little benefit over ploughing. Machinery savings but more chemicals
- Farming encourages tourism, which earns more for the economy, and should be rewarded.
- More potential for local food. Need ambition
- Organic farming yields are not catastrophically less than conventional
- Re the impact of housing development around Shrewsbury, CPRE favour affordable housing
- Little incentive now to help maintain buildings for the landscape