



WWF-UK

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Briefing

Agriculture Bill: Second Reading

WWF-UK Agriculture Bill statement briefing 20 Jan 2020

Tanya Steele, CEO at WWF UK, welcoming the bill, said:

“It’s absolutely right that this bill delivers on the promise to pay our farmers to help restore nature and cut emissions in producing the food that we need. But we must ensure their efforts are not undercut by imports that are cheap in price but catastrophically expensive for our natural world and climate.

“If we’re going to stop the food system wrecking the planet, we need to make sure all future trade deals clearly reject deforestation and other poor agricultural practices, at the same time as we invest in standards and proper enforcement in the UK.”

Further information

Welcome continued public money for public goods focus

WWF-UK welcomes the maintained focus in the Agriculture Bill 2020 on paying farmers in England to deliver public goods and the addition of soils to the list is welcome, albeit needing careful implementation to ensure payments reward long-term best practice. Public goods payments will be delivered through an Environmental Land Management scheme and will be essential for achieving the recovery of nature and Net Zero. For example, farmers may be paid for broader strips around or through their fields which provide food for pollinators or birds and help soak up run-off and soil or agrochemicals carried in this water. Alternatively, some land could be taken out of production to sequester carbon by planting trees or restoring peatland. A report in 2019 calculated the cost of delivering environmental benefits and nature’s recovery at £1.7 billion per year (£2.9 billion UK-wide)¹. At the same time, the staged reductions in direct payments² will have a significant impact on farm income, so the

¹ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/ellie-brodie/3-billion-needed-nature-friendly-farming>

² under the Common Agricultural Policy, over 80% of UK payments in 2014-2018 were made on the basis of the farmholdings’ land areas

public goods income stream and a just transition to the new system will be important in supporting individual farmers and land managers to produce the food we all need.

UK standards must not be undercut by cheap imports produced to low environmental standards.

Agricultural policy must work in tandem with trade relations. In practice, the majority of people make purchasing decisions based on price and quality. We reiterate the critical importance of ensuring that UK food production is not undercut by imports produced to poor environmental standards which would be illegal in this country, especially where the impacts are international such as climate change and air pollution. Equally, the forthcoming Environment Bill should address the impact that the UK is having on nature overseas, including a target to reduce our global footprint and a second target to ensure our food supply chains are deforestation free by the end of 2020. This should be underpinned by a mandatory 'due diligence requirement', placing companies under an obligation to assess the environmental and human rights risks and impacts in their operations and supply chains; develop a plan to address these; and implement it. This should bring benefits to UK business including supply chain resilience, social license to operate and the opportunity for reduced costs in some instances. Deforestation (for example, for producing soy animal feed for chickens, pigs and farmed fish) needs to be addressed urgently in this way, but the government should commit to bringing in a broad mandatory due diligence obligation, covering other environmental impacts and human rights.

Agricultural systems are generating severe environmental problems

The way we produce what we eat is responsible for almost 60% of the world's biodiversity loss and is a significant contributor to climate change. In the UK, farmland bird populations have fallen by 54% since 1970 and while greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture are around 14% down on levels in the 1990s, of the nine major sectors, agriculture has only performed better than transport. Conversion of both forest and open habitats to agriculture continues to put species in danger of extinction and increase agricultural greenhouse gas emissions while reducing the planet's ability to sequester them³. Globally, about 23% of human-caused GHG emissions come from forestry, agriculture and other land uses. Transforming agricultural systems in ways that protect the environment, can often benefit farm productivity both here in the UK and overseas.

The UK can and must show global leadership

So, we need to ensure that the agricultural industry as a whole follows the many examples of good environmental practice across the country. The UK has a legacy of historical deforestation, so habitat restoration and recovery are likely to be needed on some farmland⁴. The Agriculture Bill will enable these shifts to sustainable⁵ agriculture and land-use, if these

³ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/appetitefordestruction>

⁴ WWF-UK has embarked on a 'Triple Challenge' project to analyse the balance and trade-offs between food production, climate change and nature in spatial terms.

⁵ environmentally, economically and socially

objectives remain central to its implementation. Adopting practices like cover crops or wildlife margins can increase profitability, not just improve environmental outcomes. On the other hand, those farms with a chronic record of flaunting regulations need to address this poor practice immediately or be sanctioned, so that land managers who 'do the right thing' can operate on a level playing field and so that calls for "our high farming standards" to be protected can be justified. We can achieve this change through co-ordinated advice, regulatory enforcement, incentivisation, private sector standards and leadership within the agriculture sector, especially if all actors work together. This will require government to plug gaps in regulation and environmental principles that emerge as a result of Brexit, or through increased understanding around climate change impacts, for example. These baseline standards must be met by all land managers, whether they join an Environmental Land Management scheme or not. In this way, we can set an example to the world with a farming sector that produces food while restoring nature and tackling climate change.

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