

A beautiful countryside to sustain us all: food and farming

Farming is the backbone of the countryside and influences the success of the rural economy as well as the landscape. We must value and protect the countryside for its role in supporting farming, tourism and innovative businesses, providing the food and resources we need.

The next Government should:

- Promote the resilience of the food and farming system by strengthening policies to protect the best farmland from development and to foster the growth of local food economies, from field to fork

Why is farming and food important?

“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.” American author and CPRE vice-president Bill Bryson.

The countryside provides much of our food - around 60% at present - but also many other natural goods: timber, clean water, fresh air, flood protection, wildlife, inspiring landscape, a haven of tranquillity offering escape and recreation. Most of the land that provides these benefits is managed by farmers and growers who produce our food. Yet the value of these multiple benefits is too often poorly understood and overlooked.

What are the issues?

Farmland faces many pressures, particularly from development. Recent changes to planning policy have made it easier to build on green fields rather than the derelict land in urban areas that is in need of regeneration. Changes to policy that used to protect the best farmland for growing food have weakened too. Around 40% of our farmland is of this best quality. Yet, even before the planning changes, nearly 100,000 acres of farmland were lost mainly to housing and infrastructure from 1998 to 2008 and, of this around, 40% was the best land. In other words, when it comes to development, the best agricultural land is little better protected than any other.

There is clearly an issue when Government talks about food security but fails to address the loss of this capacity to produce food. When our best farmland is lost to food production, it is forever. This is happening at a time when our food and farming system faces unparalleled global pressures. These are destined to affect us locally: population growth, rising demand for wheat and meat, increasing competition for key resources such

as energy, water or phosphorus in decreasing supply, and a changing climate that is bringing more extreme unpredictable weather.

Farming has shaped the English countryside and farmers are vital for its careful management and good stewardship of its natural resources. We need them to look after the land in ways that work for us and for nature. But too often policies and market forces have achieved the opposite: the intensification of agriculture to increase yields has come at a severe cost to nature and its life support systems. Over decades, wildflower meadows, hedgerows and farmland birds declined drastically. Much wildlife has disappeared: a staggering 60% of UK species are in decline.¹ Soils have been degraded and eroded, with the run-off going into water courses. Use of high levels of artificial fertilisers drive farming's high yields but cause water pollution; their production is also energy hungry and high in greenhouse gas emissions. Farming is energy intensive too: it takes 10 calories of fossil fuel energy to produce 1 calorie of food.

Perversely, agriculture is heavily subsidised through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Subsidies are tied to the area of land managed but only weakly, if at all, to good stewardship of the land. Of the £15 billion the CAP will cost taxpayers from 2015 to 2020, 88% of it will fund business, to all intents, as usual. Only 12% is reallocated to farmers to reward them for taking extra care to manage the land for public benefit - for its wildlife, its water and the landscape.

Despite subsidies, much of farming runs at a loss. Farming has been squeezed by exposure to volatile global markets but also by relentless pressure from supermarket chains driving down prices in their race to attract customers. Where once producers could find markets in a whole range of outlets - wholesale markets, supermarkets, traditional shops and town markets - the major retailers now dominate the market: the top nine have more than 90% of it. Farmers have little power in the market; forced to take the prices they can get, they often produce at a loss. Our cheap food economy is undermining their chance to invest and slowly bankrupting them. With few choices presenting themselves, farms must scale up and become more intensive, or diversify to survive. We have continued to lose the smaller and medium size farms that contribute much to the character and diversity of the farmed countryside.² The exodus of farmers from dairying tells its own story: dairy farmer numbers in England and Wales were down from 19,000 in 2002 to 10,400 in February 2014. Some 500 farmers, or nearly 5% of all dairy farmers, have stopped producing milk in just the past year.³

Planning policy, despite its intention to protect town centres, has in the name of competition and choice allowed superstores to proliferate and move trade from town centres to the outskirts. This retail park model has sucked life from high streets and weakened investment in town centres, causing other stores to fold and our roads to become congested as we use the car more than ever for our shopping.

¹ RSPB, *The State of Nature* report, May 2013

² *From 1987 to 2003 we lost 11,000 small farms and nearly 10,000 medium sized farms.* DEFRA, 2007, *Observatory monitoring framework- indicator data sheet: farm size*, http://archive.defra.gov.uk/evidence/statistics/foodfarm/enviro/observatory/indicators/b/b1_data.htm

³ Dairy farm numbers (England and Wales) 2002 from <http://www.thedairysite.com/articles/2549/dairy-farming-systems-in-great-britain> ; February 2014 (10,413) and February 2015 figures (9914) from *Farmers Weekly* 13 February 2015 page 134

How can we fix the problem?

We must use alternatives to building on our best and finite farmland. New homes should be built where infrastructure already exists to support them, starting with disused land in need of regeneration. We need stronger policies - in planning and on land use - to ensure our best farmland is only built on in exceptional circumstances. Government must take seriously the challenge of producing enough food sustainably in ways that care for the land and all it provides if we are to withstand the global pressures we are under, not least a changing climate.

The next Government must recognise the value of environmentally sustainable production and work to reform the CAP to target it to reward farmers and growers for the public goods - the nature benefits it provides from which we all gain. Farmers need support and incentives to manage land and its natural systems for the long term and not be forced to degrade it through short term and volatile market pressures.

The shape of our food retail affects the health of our farming system and of the countryside. There is an important connection between retail diversity and a diverse, distinctive countryside. CPRE's research shows how local food can help outlets to thrive. These in turn provide a market for small and medium sized producers and this network acts as a seedbed for new businesses and new products. In this way local food economies add to rural and urban prosperity as well as the character and quality of life in the countryside and our towns and cities. The Government must strengthen policies to support local food networks. It should start with the planning system to enable local communities and councils to promote a rich diversity of food and other outlets, to support the creation of small food businesses and the conditions they need to grow.

What CPRE is doing and how you can help

CPRE is campaigning to restore the preference to use brownfield land first to protect farmland from development in national planning policy. We are planning to research the system of how farmland is classified and the evidence base that supports it. We are calling for stronger national policies to protect our best farmland from destruction except in exceptional circumstances. We will argue for access to up-to-date maps to enable communities plan for the best land use and a system that optimises protection of natural life support systems and the goods and services the land provides.

CPRE has worked with a range of other conservation organisations to press the Government to give the maximum to green farming schemes to reward those who manage the land and landscape with care, and rebuild the natural diversity and resilience upon which we rely. CPRE will continue this work in partnership to increase the subsidy available for effective green farming and to press the new Government to work to reform the CAP into a Sustainable Land Management Policy, which supports the best farming practices and uses public money wisely.

CPRE will work to promote local food networks as a way to make farming more viable, especially small to medium sized farms, to support vibrant town centres and to protect and improve the diversity and character of towns and countryside. We will seek to support

local groups wishing to research and report on their on local food networks and the public to better support their local food outlets and producers. We will press the new Government to recognise the importance of sustainable local food production and supply and the relationship to a diverse retail system. We will press them to change national planning policy to actively promote retail diversity and other measures to support the micro, small and medium-scale businesses in retail, farming and food production that are at the heart of local food economies.

If you would like to take action please consider:

- Supporting CPRE's Charter - www.saveourcountryside.org.uk
- Contacting your MP by letter or email to raise concerns, and to ask them to support our Charter
- Raising these issues with parliamentary candidates who you meet at home or at hustings before the next election. Ask them what their party is doing on these issues and urge them to speak out to protect the countryside and all that it offers to our quality of life.
- Seeking to influence your Local Plan and commenting on local planning applications. Visit www.planninghelp.org.uk and <http://www.cpre.org.uk/local-group-resources/campaigning/planning> for advice and tips.