



No time for a halt: Sustaining the farming transition to greater food security
Wildlife and Countryside Link, March 2022

Summary

- Climate change and nature depletion are the biggest threats to food security in the UK.
- A healthy and thriving natural world is essential for supporting a resilient food system. We must continue to advance a holistic agenda for farming which combines food production with restoring and improving nature, and that mitigates climate change.
- The alternative, further intensification of food production in the UK, will lead to a greater dependency on other countries for input imports, exacerbating uncertainty for farmers and resulting in less resilient farm businesses.

More nature-friendly farming means greater food security

Recent [calls](#) to halt the Agricultural Transition Plan to bolster food security in light of the invasion of the Ukraine overlook two fundamental threats to UK food security: climate change and biodiversity loss.

Producing food is heavily dependent on well-functioning ecosystems, but as one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, the threat of biodiversity loss and climate change is having a direct impact on the UK's ability to remain food secure.

The [UK Food Security Report 2021](#) found that:

- *“Climate change poses a risk to UK food production already, and this risk will grow substantially over the next 30 to 60 years. Minimising the extent of global warming and addressing the risks it poses to food production are both essential to future food security”*
- *“Soil degradation, erosion, and compaction result in losses of about £1.2 billion each year and reduce the capacity of UK soils to produce food”*
- *“Sustainable production methods ensure the UK's long term food security by protecting the natural capital embedded in healthy soil, water, and biodiverse ecosystems. Food security rests ultimately not on maximising domestic production (which is market driven), but on making best use of land types”*

In order to address these challenges, farming policy must swiftly move toward supporting farming practices which work with the grain of nature, not against it. **Evidence shows that nature-based solutions are cost-effective and can increase yields, while creating more resilient farm businesses.** For instance, a UK-wide field [study](#) found that planting legumes helped to naturally fix over 400kg of nitrogen per hectare, reducing the need for costly synthetic nitrogen fertilisers.



Another [example](#) shows that wildflower strips can improve crop yield by up to 10%, by boosting pollinator numbers. On the contrary, a 30% decline in pollinator numbers over 10 years would cost [more than £188m](#) per year in lost crop yield.

This is why many farming voices are [warning](#) against a slowing down of Government environment support schemes, due to fears that short-termism will undermine food security in the long-term if we don't address the greatest challenges to our food system is facing: climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation.

The new system for paying farmers to deliver public goods called 'Environmental Land Management' should aid a more secure food system by paying for benefits such as improved soil health, natural flood management and integrated pest management, all of which underpin food production.

Environmental Land Management is a step in the right direction for the British people, for farm businesses, for climate and for nature. As such, calls to regress should be rejected, with Environmental Land Management instead delivered at pace to ensure greater food security

Short-termism undermines food security

The invasion of the Ukraine has highlighted on-going systemic problems in the global food system.

Pressures on farmers to intensify agricultural production in recent decades has led to an increased use of chemical fertilisers.

The UK imports around [10%](#) of its nitrogen fertiliser from Russia. Additionally, as gas prices increase, so do fertiliser costs; prices have increased by [200%](#) year on year making reliance on these inputs not only unsustainable but uneconomic.

However, an [average](#) 40% of nitrogen fertiliser is left unused or leaks into the environment, damaging the soil, polluting waterways and exacerbating climate change by evaporating into the environment, which undermines the natural systems upon which farming relies.

Another issue that has come to light through the invasion of Ukraine is the impact on wheat and grain markets. As Russia and Ukraine together produce around 25% of the world's wheat, disruption from the war is increasing wheat prices which impacts the cost of animal feedstuffs. Half of the UK's arable crops (including many wheat crops) are grown for animal feed.

Intensive livestock farming relies on these feedstocks. And an unwillingness by retailers to pass these rising costs on means these systems quickly become uneconomic. A move to more sustainable, pasture-fed livestock husbandry, would reduce the environmental footprint of livestock systems and reduce reliance on the volatile international markets that intensive livestock farming depends on.

A moratorium on the new farming policies will not fix these systemic issues in the short or the long-term but will prolong uncertainty for the farming industry.

To create resilience against market shocks, the **government must ensure that farmers' are given the tools and support that they need to produce sustainable food by fostering healthy soils, mitigating climate change and increasing farm-enhancing biodiversity.**



Recommendations

The government must ensure that farmers are given the tools and support they need to farm in a more resilient way, which fosters increased biodiversity and climate mitigation by:

- Speeding up the development of Environmental Land Management to ensure that farmers are given the support and tools they need to transition to a more sustainable farming system, and the clarity needed for them to plan effectively for their businesses.
- As a minimum, committing to maintain the farming budget of £2.4bn beyond this parliament for the payment of public money for public goods, to help fund and bed-in the transition.
- Ensuring that agricultural investment schemes invest more in nature and climate adaptation on-farm, covering the cost of increased knowledge, expertise and equipment for farm businesses.
- Ensuring sufficient investment is available to support the transition including investment in business advice to improve sustainability and long-term resilience.