

The Rt Hon Steve Reed OBE MP
Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
By email

9th December 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

Farmers are facing huge economic challenges at exactly the moment we need agricultural reform to speed forward for nature's recovery and a sustainable food system.

Extreme weather has contributed to England's second-worst harvest on record. Surging inflation, plummeting income, unfair supply chains, and years of underfunded Environmental Land Management schemes threaten our shared vision of a sustainable future for farming. The pause in capital grants, a legacy of early ELM design flaws, will make key environmental investments even more difficult.

This moment lays bare the deep systemic issues that have dogged England's agricultural transition. From an unjust food system to inadequate investment in nature-friendly farming, the root causes must be addressed. We are writing to urge you to act quickly on supply chain fairness and ELM reform to make the transition to sustainable farming fair and rewarding.

1. Supply Chain Fairness

By tackling supply chain injustices, the government can improve confidence among farmers and enable sustainable investment across the sector.

The UK food supply chain is heavily concentrated, with over 95% of food sold through twelve retailers. This leaves farmers with little bargaining power. Farmers often earn less than 1p for every pound spent by consumers, with unfair contracts, supermarket pressures, and exploitative practices stifling their ability to invest in nature friendly farming.

Addressing these issues requires reforms to the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA), a progressive trade policy that supports UK farming including a set of minimum environmental threshold for imported agri-food products in domestic law to provide a level playing field for farmers and businesses, and new routes to markets for farmers including via public procurement. Completing and enforcing sector-specific codes of practice, particularly for fresh produce, will help ensure fair pricing and accountability across supply chains.

2. Delivering better Environmental Land Management Schemes

Five years after the Agricultural Act, Environmental Land Management schemes remain far from meeting their full potential. Their rollout has been slow, underfunded, and confusing. The decision in October to maintain rather than increase the farming budget will not help progress.

We urge the government to increase the annual farm budget at the upcoming comprehensive spending review to £3.1 billion in England to support nature-friendly farming, safeguard livelihoods, improve animal welfare and meet critical climate, nature and water targets. Expanding access to Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier is also crucial, particularly to help 7,000 farmers left in limbo and undervalued as old agreements expire. Accelerating Landscape Recovery schemes is imperative to scale up biodiversity and climate recovery efforts, especially in vulnerable upland areas where these interventions are most urgently needed.

These schemes are essential for efforts to deliver habitat restoration, carbon sequestration, enhanced animal welfare, flood risk mitigation and improved water quality.

Without decisive investment and a clearer plan for delivery, farmers risk being caught between a lack of market access and inadequate support for sustainable transitions.

A Shared Future for Farming and Nature

The frustration expressed in recent farmer protests has some roots in decades of what many perceive as managed decline. Farmers feel undervalued, overburdened, and unsupported in their efforts to embrace a transition to nature friendly farming. This should concern us all.

We believe in a future where farming, conservation, climate resilience and animal welfare go hand in hand. Achieving this vision requires a strong partnership between government and farmers. We stand ready to work with the government and farmers to address the root causes of current discontent and deliver a farming system that is both economically viable and ecologically restorative.

Yours sincerely,

Beccy Speight, CEO, RSPB

Joan Edwards OBE, Director Policy and Public Affairs, the Wildlife Trusts

Angela Francis, Director of Policy Solutions at WWF-UK

Will McCallum, Co Executive Director, Greenpeace UK
Roger Mortlock, CEO, CPRE, the countryside charity
Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife & Countryside Link
Helen Browning OBE, CEO, Soil Association
Robert Fraser, Executive Director, Real Farming Trust
Kath Dalmeny, CEO, Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
Abi Bunker, Director of Conservation and External Affairs, The Woodland Trust
Jyoti Fernandes MBE, Policy Coordinator, Landworkers Alliance
Dr Keith Tyrell, Director, PAN UK
Jackie Pearce-Dickens, CEO, Whole Health Agriculture
Paul Colson, Acting CEO, Institute of Fisheries Management
Erica Popplewell, Head of Campaigns, River Action
Julie Williams, CEO, Butterfly Conservation
Rose O'Neill, CEO, Campaign for National Parks
Nida Al-Fulaij, CEO, People's Trust for Endangered Species
Dr Tony Gent, CEO, Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
Suzy Russell, Coordinator, Community Supported Agriculture Network UK
Miles King, CEO, People Need Nature
Julia Kirby Smith, CEO, Better Food Traders
Claire Bass, Senior Director Campaigns and Public Affairs, Humane Society International/UK
James West, Chief Public Affairs Manager UK, Compassion in World Farming
Ellen Fay, CEO, Sustainable Soils Alliance
Gill Perkins, CEO, Bumblebee Conservation Trust
David Bowles, Head of Public Affairs, RSPCA
Liz Charles, CEO, Organic Growers Alliance
Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Spaces Society
Adele Jones, CEO, Sustainable Food Trust
Carina Millston, CEO, Feedback
Kyle Lischak, Head of UK, Client Earth
Kit Stoner, CEO, Bat Conservation Trust
Kathy Wormald, CEO, Froglife
Mark Lloyd, CEO, The Rivers Trust
Christopher Price, CEO, Rare Breeds Survival Trust
Sarah Fowler, CEO, WWT
Jeremy Biggs, CEO, Freshwater Habitats Trust
Nicola Hutchinson, Director of Conservation and acting CEO, Plantlife
Julie Brown, Director, Growing Communities
Sonul Badiani-Hammett, UK Country Director, FOUR PAWS UK