

To: Robert Hansard, Bright Blue

Date: November 2018

Ref: Bright Blue – call for written evidence on a conservative manifesto for conservation

Contact: Diane Mitchell

Tel: 0247 685 8500

Email: diane.mitchell@nfu.org.uk

Bright Blue - A conservative manifesto for conservation Call for written evidence

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) represents 55,000 members in England and Wales, involved in 46,000 farming businesses. In addition, we have 55,000 countryside members with an interest in farming and the countryside. The NFU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Bright Blue call for written evidence on a conservative manifesto for conservation.

Given the interests of our members businesses, we are limiting our response to answering the questions in the sub-section entitled 'Rural'. In addition to this written evidence submission, Bright Blue may also wish to be aware that the NFU is about to publish a report entitled 'United by our environment, our food, our future' on the 11 December 2018. This report will give an honest and balanced appraisal of the progress made and challenges facing the farmed environment covering the 5 environmental themes of landscape & access, biodiversity, soil, water and air.

1. Where is there scope for the agricultural sector to assist in mitigating carbon emissions (for example, through carbon sinks)?

[Agriculture is well placed to provide green energy sources, displacing the use of fossil fuels](#). Over the years, it has made a significant contribution towards decarbonisation of its operations and of the UK economy through renewable energy production. Nearly 40 per cent of farmers and growers have already invested in some form of renewable energy production for their own supply or for export to other users. Solar power remains the most popular technology, followed by medium-sized installations of biomass boilers and wind turbines. Such diversifications offer farm businesses stable and predictable financial returns which, in turn, help improve business resilience. Over the past ten years the government's various renewable energy schemes have driven the growth of small and medium-sized renewable energy projects across the UK as well as larger projects paying land rents to farmers.

Transport biofuels produced from certified sustainable arable crops, for example under the Assured Combinable Crops Scheme in the UK, offer one of the very few scalable and cost efficient solutions at present to decarbonising the European transport sector. In addition to its significant contribution to reducing emissions, the biofuel market is a valuable outlet for UK arable production, often putting a floor in volatile commodity markets, providing stability and security to those supplying it, as well as producing a good source of high protein animal feed.

2. Are there any nascent developments in the agricultural sector which could reduce the sector's environmental footprint? If so, should they be recipient to government funding?

Science, research and innovation are as important to increasing resource efficiency and reducing our environmental impact as boosting our productivity, growth and competitiveness. The NFU report [Feeding the Future: Four Years On](#) provides examples of what should be funded that would lessen farming's impact on the environment and improve our resource efficiency. Examples include:

- Provide an ability to map and understand the source of spatial variation in soil nutrients and biophysical properties contributing to soil health as a prelude to better fertiliser targeting and achievement of both environmental and productivity gains; and

- Deliver technology to sample and manage air and water quality in housed livestock production systems including early detection of diseases.

Yet research can only make an impact on farm performance if it is put into practice. Having innovative practices and technologies developed and tested on farms, with right advice has the potential to lead to more rapid and sustained environmental gains. Funding in the Domestic Agricultural Policy should therefore be aimed at ensuring R&D findings are practical, disseminated, understood and implemented by farm businesses. The current European Innovation Partnership initiative under the existing Rural Development Programme for England provides a good starting point for getting research findings out to farms and something that could be delivered through a future Domestic Agricultural Policy.

3. What measures or practices can the agricultural sector engage in to best protect or enhance biodiversity in rural Britain?

4. What measures or practices can the agricultural sector engage in to best protect or enhance soil quality in rural Britain?

There is a range of measures or practices that can protect and enhance soil quality and biodiversity, but because of the range of soil types and farming systems, no one size fits all. Building on the work that the NFU has previously undertaken on the future of agricultural policy for the environment '[Delivering for the Farmed Environment](#)', what is perhaps more important is that future policies need to recognise that:

- Future environment land management schemes need to be voluntary, open to all farmers, simple to apply for and administer, and offer a fair reward;
- New market approaches, such as payments for ecosystems services, could complement any future environment land management scheme;
- Support for farm infrastructure projects, new technologies, and innovative tools is needed to help improve productivity while reducing our environmental footprint;
- Science, research and innovation have an important role to help increase our resource efficiency and reduce our environmental impact; and
- We need better data on wider biodiversity, like insects, and more data about the quality of our soils. There are still significant gaps in our knowledge about current farm practices and how these contribute to environmental improvement.

5. Should the UK engage in rewilding? If so, to what extent?

Farmers are already doing much to support our biodiversity and it could be argued that they are already undertaking some form of 'rewilding'. [For example](#),

- Under agri-environment schemes in England, more than 30,000 kilometres of hedgerows have been planted or restored.
- There are around 270,000 hectares managed voluntarily by farmer for positive environmental delivery under the Campaign for the Farmed Environment.

However, the term 'rewilding' means different things to different people and to some is about abandonment of large swathes of the countryside. For others, it includes a degree of intervention and management. The key point is that the debate ignores the fact that our countryside, with its distinctive appeal and appearance, is a landscape managed by farmers who play a key role. Much of the countryside is farmed by families who have been there for generations and have a strong interest in sustainability to secure their livelihoods and the landscape for the future. Any discussions about rewilding areas need to consider this context and the possible impacts that could follow.

Where rewilding considers species reintroductions as part of the programme, any reintroduction, particularly if the species has not been in this country for hundreds of years, can have a massive impact on the many benefits that the countryside delivers, including on local wildlife and biodiversity, as well as agricultural systems. In the case of beavers, the NFU has concerns about the damage to farmland and the landscape caused by their physical activities. Farmers and the public must have the tools to manage the impacts beavers will have to farmland, the countryside, flood defences and urban areas. In the time since Lynx last appeared in this country, the habitat around us has changed dramatically,

our population has increased drastically and on top of this, we do not know how Lynx would behave in the current environment. We also have serious concerns over the impact of lynx on farm animals, particularly lambs.

6. How can pollinator decline be halted and reversed?

The [National Pollinator Strategy](#) sets out a range of evidence-based actions to help pollinating insects survive and thrive. One of the greatest basic challenges with bees and other pollinators is understanding what their populations levels actually are – the fact is that while we know there have been declines in biodiversity, we do not know whether the actual number of wild pollinators is declining or not, because to date there's been little robust monitoring of their abundance (i.e. how many are out there doing the job of pollination). This is why the NFU, along with groups like Buglife and Friends of the Earth, has been a strong supporter of establishing a [UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme](#) under the National Pollinator Strategy. Proper monitoring of pollinators has to be the starting point for any action on declines.

We know more about pollinator biodiversity – the number of different species. [Evidence](#) shows there has been dramatic declines in pollinator biodiversity, but these happened in Britain and other EU countries between the 1950s and 1980s (neonicotinoids weren't introduced until the 1990s), and that during the last 25 years declines in pollinator biodiversity have slowed significantly in Britain (the above study shows the biodiversity of solitary bees, which make up 90% of our species of wild bee, has actually shown an increase). While biodiversity in Britain will continue to bear the marks of past declines for a long time, it's clear this biodiversity loss has slowed in recent decades for many bees. Researchers suggest this slowing has happened since 1990 because of increased conservation work, including agri-environmental management by farmers and growers to encourage biodiversity. Farmers are acutely aware of the crucial role bees and pollinators play. Over the last 3 years (2014-17) the Campaign for the Farmed Environment has encouraged farmers to support pollinators by sowing 1,500ha of wildflowers, enhancing biodiversity on 50,000ha of farmland, and delivering advice on helping pollinators to over 1,750 farmers at over 90 events round the country.

7. What regulatory approach should the UK adopt on genetic modification and genetic editing in food production after it leaves the EU?

[There are a number of potential benefits for UK farmers and consumers from the use of new crop breeding techniques such as genetic modification and genetic editing](#), particularly faced with increasing volatility created by climate change, price fluctuations and socio-economic factors. Pests, weeds and diseases continue to threaten both quality and quantity of food produced and so access to New Breeding Techniques or innovative plant breeding will be a vital tool in managing these challenges.

Whilst there is huge opportunity for these new techniques to benefit the agricultural industry, realising this potential largely depends on how they are regulated. The NFU would therefore like to see New Breeding Technologies regulated in accordance with the assessments from EFSA, JRC and ACRE in line with the scientific consensus that most of these techniques do not produce GMOs.

8. Should organic farming be better supported?

There are many parallels with conventional farming and similarly, organic farming could also be supported through the measures and actions set out in our answers to questions 3 and 4.

9. What are the most important public goods provided by the agricultural sector which should be rewarded through government funding?

[We recognise that in future the challenges will be broad and varied](#) and that the agricultural sector will have to do more to address a range of priorities. These include water & air quality, landscape character, wildlife & biodiversity, natural flood management, the historic environment, soil, climate change, woodland & forestry, upland and access/ educational access.