

DELIVERING NATURE RECOVERY HOW, WHAT, WHERE?

A red squirrel features on the front cover of the government's Environmental Improvement Plan, described as the roadmap for a 'cleaner, greener country'.



It's a visible reminder that the goal of environmental improvement enshrined in the Environment Act is not just about tackling climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and planting more trees. It's also about restoring biodiversity to ensure that we have thriving, diverse and species-rich ecosystems.

Talking about levels of biodiversity in the countryside can be divisive. Many farmers and landowners feel under attack when conversation turns to the issue of declines in wildlife species. Meanwhile, environmental organisations get frustrated about a lack of progress in the area.

The problem is compounded by the fact that people's perceptions around what the countryside should look and feel like can be very different. One camp of people can look at a landscape and see natural beauty and a green and pleasant land. But others will look at the same view and see a desolate, struggling ecosystem.

WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

- The 2019 State of Nature report, produced by a partnership of more than 70 organisations, sought to collate data on the UK's biodiversity to give an overview of how nature was faring. Its conclusion was that 41% of all UK species studied had declined since the 1970s, with agricultural management cited as one of the pressures on UK nature, alongside climate change, urbanisation, pollution, hydrological change, invasive non-native species and woodland management.
- In 2021, researchers at the Natural History Museum published analysis of a Biodiversity Intactness Index which showed that the UK had only 53% of its biodiversity left, making it among the most nature-depleted countries in the world.
- A more recent Biodiversity Indicators report from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee acknowledged that between 1980 and 2019 there had been a positive uplift in bat numbers and the amount of land under agri-environment schemes, but little or no improvement in terms of farmland birds and pollinator numbers.

So, the data confirms there is a compelling case for more to be done to encourage nature recovery. But how are we going to get there?

Over recent months the government has set down a number of legally binding environmental targets as part of the Environment Act which include measures to boost nature. This includes a commitment to halt the decline in species abundance by 2030 and ensure that species abundance in 2042 is greater than in 2022, and at least 10% greater than 2030. It also intends to restore or create more than 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife-rich habitats outside protected sites by 2042.

In early 2023, the government followed up these targets with the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2023 – effectively an update of its 25-year Environment Plan. In that, it said it was aiming for between 65 to 80% of landowners and farmers to adopt nature-friendly farming on at least 10-15% of their land by 2030. It is also expecting the farming sector to contribute at least 80% of the target to restore or create 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat.

Defra says farmers will be supported in this work through a combination of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS), Landscape Recovery Scheme and England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO). It also expects private investment to play a role.

So, will it work? There's a line that is often used at farming conferences about the need to 'live as though you'll die tomorrow, but farm as if you'll live forever'. It's a quote which highlights the pride that almost every land manager has in being a custodian of the countryside. A message about their desire to hand on their farms to the next generation in better condition than when they inherited them.

And that desire does seem to translate into a genuine willingness to do more for nature. A survey carried out jointly by Strutt & Parker and the Country Land & Business Association in mid-2022 found that most land managers are enthusiastic about managing land to improve biodiversity. When asked which public goods they were likely or very likely to deliver with appropriate schemes and payments in place, 82% of respondents chose the option of managing land to improve biodiversity.

With this in mind, Strutt & Parker asked a range of stakeholders for their views on the scale of challenge the UK faces in terms of biodiversity, what else they would like to see from government and what practical steps land managers can take to play their part now.

Jim Elliott, SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR, **Green Alliance**

Diversity in land use and management holds the key to restoring nature

The Office for Environmental Protection's damning report on the lack of progress on the government's 25-year Environment Plan shows that urgent and additional action is needed from government to reverse nature decline. The ongoing development of the new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs), replacing EU farm subsidies, and the forthcoming Land Use Framework (LUF) are the obvious vehicles for this action. But they need to be realistic about the scale of the challenge and the changes needed to land use and management to address it.



New analysis from Green Alliance shows that diversity in how land is used and managed is by far the cheapest and most effective way to restore nature. This means focusing on maximising sustainable food production on the best land, a mix of food production and environmental public goods delivery on medium productive land, and using some of the least productive land to restore and manage more natural habitats like woodlands, wetlands and species-rich grasslands.

It is vital for nature recovery, because different species need different types of habitat. An approach that focused on maximising food production on the majority of land would fail species that thrive in more traditional, extensive farmed environments, even if land was freed up for more natural habitat.

Similarly, converting all land to extensive, nature-friendly, agro-ecological farming would be good for farm-adapted nature, but would fail species that need areas of natural habitat with no or very limited food production.

Happily, the diverse approach to land use and management is a win for taxpayers and farmers, as well as nature. The emissions reductions and carbon sequestration in woods and restored peatlands mean there is much less reliance on expensive engineered carbon removals like bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, making it cheaper to reach net zero. And the increased environmental public goods mean more money is channelled to farmers on land where profitable food production is difficult. Our analysis suggests this approach would give the least profitable 62% of farmers a better financial return than they have now.

A new consensus among farmers and environmentalists is building around this approach to land use and management. This should give the Environment Secretary the confidence to be bold in ensuring the LUF and ELMs deliver this change.

Dr Alastair Leake FRAgS FIAgrM, POLICY DIRECTOR, **Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust**

We think the government should have established a very simple baseline payment based on the amount of land on the holding which is not farmed to support nature recovery

In the past we wanted food so we paid for the cropped land, and deducted the uncropped area. Now we want nature, which is largely in the uncropped area, so we should pay for that – public money for public goods. Farms with wide hedges, mixed woodland, buffer strips, ponds etc. would be rewarded. We even already know how much of this we have on the farm by deducting cropped area from holding size. We can then give enhanced payment for variations in management that bring further benefits to biodiversity.

There is a role for private sector investment, too. We require both if we are to succeed. There are iconic species – such as skylarks – which may attract commercial sponsors or charity support, but more ‘drab’ species will require public money.

When it comes to managing land for nature recovery, it’s not a question of quantity, rather one of quality. Low-yielding agriculture land repurposed and managed as nature habitat can deliver a huge boost to biodiversity. The better managed it is, the less is needed to deliver the same outcome for nature. But we also have to think more widely about some land management practices. For example, the consequences of one-year Farm Business Tenancies on Grade 1 land where the soil is being degraded by short-term financial objectives.

Farmers can start to make changes now. For example, a good first step given the increases in input costs would be turning yield maps into gross margin maps. Land which is not performing in terms of food production can then be considered for delivering other environmental outcomes such as carbon storage or biodiversity offsets.

When it comes to Countryside Stewardship, we also need to recognise there is robust evidence that some Red Listed species require more than just food and habitat measures if they are to survive, let alone recover. The new enhanced CSS needs to include funded predation management options as part of a wider recovery package for these species. Habitat creation without enhanced management is doomed to fail, as we have long witnessed.

The good news is with the right measures and the right support, nature recovery can be very rapid. The GWCT Allerton Project in Leicestershire doubled their songbird numbers in just three years, while increasing crop productivity at the same time, by combining habitat creation and improvement with management measures.



Alice Groom, HEAD OF SUSTAINABLE LAND USE POLICY, **RSPB**

Nature is in crisis

A recent report from RSPB and the Natural History Museum listed the UK as the 12th worst country in the world for biodiversity intactness. England is 7th worst. The Environment Act has now enshrined in law the government’s ambition to reverse nature’s decline, but we need to see policy that supports that.



As land use intensification has been the biggest driver of biodiversity loss, we now need to see changes to food and farming policy that will enable nature recovery. That means a shift from direct payments to public money for public goods, underpinned by fair but firm regulatory standards, plus core trade standards on the environment and animal welfare.

Reviving nature and acting on climate change is not opposed to food production, but a precondition for it. The farming system of the future must create more opportunities for nature, both within farmland and in the wider landscape, alongside food production. This is essential to maintain the productive capacity of the land and ensure profitable and resilient farm businesses, whilst helping to meet nature and climate goals.

All farms should manage at least 10% of land as good quality wildlife habitats. This is proven to help species recover and provide agronomic benefits, such as pest and pollination services, and additional income streams. Embracing nature-positive farming techniques can bring business benefits - for example, by helping to improve soil and crop health, and by reducing input costs.

Defra must invest in the higher tier of Countryside Stewardship, to support and reward more farmers to adopt more stretching and targeted measures, such as habitat restoration and creation, and species-specific interventions. Currently, the Defra 'family' has capacity to support c300-500 agreements per year. This scheme needs to exceed the 2,000 - 2,500 Higher Level Stewardship agreements secured every year a decade ago.

Government investment is critical, though private finance has an important supplementary role. In addition to providing public funding, government has a key role in helping to establish well-regulated private markets in ecosystem services, to secure further investment to reward environmental delivery and to support farmers in creating diverse and resilient farm businesses.

Rapid action is required to reach nature positive by 2030, and net zero by 2050. It’s not an exaggeration to say that our very survival on this planet depends on it.

Jonathan Armitage, HEAD OF FARMING, **Strutt & Parker**

Some common themes run through the contributions above, with everyone in agreement that something needs to be done urgently to reverse declines in wildlife and biodiversity

But it is also evident that different organisations do slightly differ in their approach on what is the right way forward. For example, there still seems to be some debate around whether we should be pursuing a policy of land sharing or land sparing. Land sharing is the concept that we should be embedding nature-friendly farming methods across all farmland, while land sparing is the premise that we should concentrate food production on high-yielding land and creating wildlife-rich habitats on the other bits.

With no universally agreed position, this has created somewhat of a quandary for farmers and landowners about what is expected of them. Strutt & Parker's Farming team has been thinking for some time about what 'good' arable farming looks like in practical terms. This is defining 'good' in terms of profitably producing food, while implementing farming practices which will enhance the natural environment.

The findings are based on independent research from a wide range of organisations, as well as our own experiences.

In terms of strategy, farmers should consider implementing the following measures which are focused around being as efficient as possible. This should help to boost profitability, while also reducing the negative effects associated with the use of fertiliser and pesticides.



- Turn yield maps into profitability maps to ensure that you are only farming where it is profitable. Yields on headlands are 10-38% lower – with the same level of inputs required as field centres – so consider using lower-performing areas for wildlife habitats.
- Understand what valuable public goods your land holds – this may involve getting a natural capital account produced.
- Grow profits from diversification and environmental management to reduce the impact of cuts in Basic Payments and to spread business risk. There are opportunities for new income streams from the ELM schemes, biodiversity offsetting and selling environmental credits in private and public markets.
- Improve soil health by introducing a soil management protocol and benchmarking your improvement over time. This may involve applying some principles of regenerative agriculture such as use of ground cover, limiting mechanical soil disturbance and increasing plant biodiversity.
- Use beetle banks and other integrated pest management techniques to cut down on the need for pesticides.
- Make small changes to the way you apply fertiliser to improve usage efficiency. On a typical farm, efficiency is about 60% but 80% or better is achievable, which should reduce costs and cut nitrate leaching.
- Stop pesticides getting into watercourses by following best practice on sprayer filling and washing, and through the use of buffer strips.

To encourage wildlife and nature recovery the following measures can be considered:

- Set a target of 10% of land on a farm being dedicated to providing good quality wildlife habitats. This area includes wood, trees, hedges, watercourses, rough grass, pollinator and wildlife-food habitats.
- Focus on managing existing features of the farm well as they will be the most wildlife-rich areas. Look for ways to expand them where possible and join up areas of habitat with corridors of a similar habitat.
- Hedgerows and field margins often form the main network of uncropped areas on arable farms so manage them with the objective of supporting local species throughout the year, including during the 'winter food gap'. Taller and wider hedges provide greater structural diversity and consider establishing 6m (or more) margins to create habitat alongside and reduce spray drift into hedges.
- Manage any areas of existing woodland as it is likely to be the most valuable habitat on your farm.



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