

Brexit and our land: Securing the future of Welsh farming
Sustainable Food Trust's vision

The Sustainable Food Trust welcomes the Welsh Government's *Brexit and our land: Securing the future of Welsh farming* and their adoption of a whole-farm approach, which integrates efficient and sustainable food production with practices that maintain and enhance natural and human capital. We support their objective to design a new agriculture support system that corrects the economic distortions that currently exist within food and farming and reintegrate food systems in harmony with the natural environment. Such an approach could have multiple benefits, including climate change mitigation, improvements in biodiversity and encouraging better diets and public health outcomes.

To achieve the systemic shift towards more sustainable farming methods, we need to unlock the barriers of change since the current business model means that most farmers have no option but to employ agricultural practices that do not serve the public interest in terms of its impacts on environment and public health. Through the new Agriculture Policy framework, the Welsh Government has the opportunity to create the economic environment where farmers are financially supported for adopting sustainable practices, which can then emerge as the most profitable and economically-viable way of producing food.

To enable the widespread shift towards a food production system that is truly integrated and functions in harmony with nature, the Sustainable Food Trust recommends that the Welsh Government introduce of a suite of sustainable farming policies that could transform Welsh food and farming, acting as a beacon for others to follow. These should include;

- Rewarding farming systems that build and maintain **soil carbon** through crop rotations which include a soil fertility building phase, usually with clover/grass to reduce inputs and improve long-term soil health.
- Incentivizing the maintenance of holistic systems of **grassland management** and deliver a GHG reduction, carbon sequestration, improved water management and increased biodiversity above and below the soil line.
- Applying the **polluter pays principle** ensuring financial accountability for practices that negatively impact environmental and public health so that those who practices have negative impact bear the financial costs of that damage with the money raised being used to support good farming practices.
- Supporting **small-scale regional horticulture** with an emphasis on investment in vertically-integrated horticulture that focuses on provenance and increase access to nutrient-dense food.
- Developing **regional infrastructure** for localized food systems to tackle the move towards centralized supply chains and supermarket dominance, including local abattoirs since the closure of **local abattoirs** undermines the ability of farmers to diversify and sell meat locally.
- Rewarding high standards of **animal welfare** to ensure a good life for farm animals where they can express their natural behaviour and be raised in an ethical way to create a better-quality product.
- Reducing the use of **chemical inputs** including artificial nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides, which have damaging effects on water quality, biodiversity and public health. By reducing high input farming systems, the level of agrichemicals in the environment can be dramatically reduced.

- Employing **public procurement** and purchasing targets for local producers, as opposed to local wholesalers, to provide key food staples to schools, hospitals, government offices, and prisons.
- Incentivizing farming practices that incorporate **positive in-crop biodiversity** to dramatically reverse UK species loss through a whole-farm landscape-based approach that requires more than simply greening the edges of fields and creating isolated areas of natural habitats.
- Supporting **employment-based incentives** for jobs both in primary agriculture and value-added production, helping to revitalize the rural economy and bring life back into rural communities.
- Supporting farmer who introduce **public access** to farms through education programs to better educate the urban population (specifically children) to the realities of agriculture and rural life.
- Enhancing human capital through increasing **skills** and a system of **apprenticeships** on farms to provide added entry points for young people looking to enter the sector and encourage the next generation.
- Improving **mental and public health** through increased access to countryside and improving diets, which would help to tackle increasing concerns of mental health and reduce the non-communicable diseases.

Public money for public goods

To make this shift effective, the two funding strands of support (“economic resilience” and “public goods”) should be integrated, meaning that farmers could only receive support for “economic resilience” if they also deliver **public goods**. We think there is scope within the policy proposed by the Welsh Government to expand the term “economic resilience” to recognize the capital needed for farmers to be able to deliver the maximum environmental benefit. It is essential to acknowledge the interconnected nature of farming within the ecosystem. We would therefore propose that the “economic resilience” funding strand be retitled as “**economic and systemic resilience**” to better reflect a harmonised vision of farming. We would also propose that an additional funding category for “systemic resilience” be added to provide a route for farmers to access necessary infrastructure funding grants and capital investments to enhance the productive capacity.

Monitoring and Managing the Public Goods Outcomes

To monitor the impact of these schemes, Welsh Government could require all farmers to submit an annual sustainability assessment using a framework of harmonised metrics and units of measure. The data derived from such an assessment could serve multiple functions: for government and government agencies to monitor eligibility and the impact of public purse support, for certification schemes to collect data they require, for consumers by providing more information about their food, and most importantly, for producers as a farm management tool.

To demonstrate eligibility for Government support and to enable the delivery of public goods effectively, we recommend that the Welsh Government introduce a **sustainability assessment** that farmers would have to complete **annually**. This assessment could provide the necessary data needed to determine the level of support each farmer receives as well as helping Welsh Government to understand and monitor success and failures.

The benefit of the assessment would be three-fold:

1. The reporting of farm data would allow the Welsh Government to have a better understanding of the **national situation** for each specific public good (such as biodiversity and net carbon emissions) which would allow for more targeted interventions to help to meet the stated goal. For example, if the goal is reducing antibiotic usage, a common framework to measure on-farm usage would allow comparison of farm data.
2. By using a harmonised framework, farmers could **benchmark** themselves to show that they are delivering on their commitments and provide evidence of the improvement. Farmers should be encouraged to progressively increase their environmental commitments since all farms can become more sustainable, and the annual sustainability assessment would provide the necessary information to improve.
3. By implementing this annual sustainability assessment, trade organisations and certification bodies (Red Tractor, Leaf, Soil Association) could draw on the data to help with decision making, as opposed to conducting all their own assessment on each farm. This will save time and paperwork for farmers, allowing them to concentrate on growing food in a sustainable manner, and would **streamline the delivery process** for certification bodies.

We would recommend that this could (at least in part) be effectively delivered through an online system (similar to the model for the **online system** for filling in your tax return) that would enable farmers and land managers to easily and efficiently upload the necessary information as a management tool. While backup and spot inspections would still be necessary, particularly in higher risk cases i.e. involving livestock, shifting the responsibility over to the farmer would help them to better understand and appreciate the impact making small changes can have, both to the land and to their business models. For the assessment to be comprehensive, there needs to be a **blend of specific targets, proxies and hard data collection methods**. These would include (but not limited to) monitoring:

- Soil organic carbon levels and microbial life
- On-farm educational courses for new entrants and apprenticeships offers
- Acreage of forage legume crops
- Levels of on-farm biodiversity
- Quantity of agrichemical application
- Hedgerow mileage and quality
- On-farm nutrient cycling
- High welfare management of livestock
- Cultivation of heritage and local breeds
- Greenhouse gas emissions
- School-children visits
- Water infiltration rates
- Antibiotic usage

Transition Period

We would suggest that **smaller farms that are at greater economic risk** from volatility in the market should continue to receive their payments during the transition period while larger farms that have better economic resilience should have their payments reduced more rapidly. Additionally, during the transition period, the **payments should be directly linked to public goods** so that only farmers delivering ecosystem services will receive support.