

Written evidence submitted by the Woodland Trust (AB40)

The Agriculture Bill House of Commons Bill Committee

The Woodland Trust is the UK's leading woodland conservation charity. Our vision is of a UK rich in native woods and trees, for people and wildlife. We own and manage over 1,250 sites, covering 26,000ha and have over 500,000 members and supporters across the UK.

Current agricultural policy has been accused of supporting environmental damaging activities with one hand and then subsidising restorative action with the other. We need a new Sustainable Land Management Policy that recognises the need for a sustainable environment if we are to continue to deliver the benefits of agriculture and other land uses in the long term. In particular we wish to see a far more integrated approach to land management that enables the benefits of trees at a variety of scales – from larger scale planting to smaller agro-forestry initiatives –to be realised for the benefit of society.

We have been working with a range of land managers, including farmers and foresters, for many years to ensure trees, woods and forestry are part of sustainable land management systems. We are using this experience to provide evidence of the value of practices such as agroforestry¹; restoration of damaged ancient woodland; and the creation and management of woods, trees and hedgerows for increasing environmental benefits, economic returns and long term productivity.

Over the last few months we have taken part in in-depth discussions with many of our partners to gain a greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing them post Brexit. While the views in this submission belong to the Woodland Trust we have used quotes (both anonymously and attributed) from our discussions with our partners to illustrate the points.

Summary

The Woodland Trust broadly welcomes the Agriculture Bill and particularly its move away from direct payments to public money for public goods.

However we are concerned about the concentration of the Bill on agriculture as opposed to all rural land uses, as well as the absence of reference to a regulatory framework, targets for the Bill, or a financial underpinning.

To ensure the Bill delivers on its potential, and meets the Government's ambition to deliver a 'green Brexit' and become a world leader on environmental standards the following amendments will be necessary:

- a mechanism to secure long term funding for farmers and land managers so they can have confidence in the new system and sufficient support to deliver the public goods we all depend on, like biodiverse and resilient natural and semi-natural habitats, functioning ecosystems and healthy soils;
- the introduction of duties on ministers, rather than the handover of powers, to ensure ambition set now is acted on in the future; these should include a duty to have an

¹ Agroforestry describes farming systems which deliberately combine trees/shrubs with agricultural crops or livestock in a land management approach that balances productive and protective functions of ecosystems.

environmental land management scheme, and to use supply chain powers to ensure farmers receive a fair price for their produce;

- a reflection of government policy that public goods are the primary reason for public intervention, ensuring any productivity payments should contribute to the delivery of these goods;
- the establishment of a strong regulatory baseline with clear enforcement mechanisms to secure essential protections and underpin taxpayers' investment;
- ambitious and measurable targets to secure a stable and enduring policy, that restores the natural environment and enhances public access.
- safeguards to ensure future international trade deals will neither undermine domestic standards nor undercut farmers.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Woodland Trust welcomes the change of direction for land use and management in England highlighted by the Agriculture Bill, with the clear indication that future payments will need to be much more focused on the payment of public money for the delivery and care of public goods.
- 1.2. Intensive agriculture has been, and remains, the biggest driver of biodiversity decline across the UK, and this Bill offers us the opportunity to reverse this situation and take important steps to develop a sustainable land management system that safeguards our future.
- 1.3. Trees and woods contribute to providing many of our essential requirements: clean air, water, soil, food, fuel and building materials, biodiversity, recreation, health and wellbeing, tourism, cultural heritage, climate mitigation and adaptation including carbon sequestration. While some of these are private goods for which there are existing markets, many of these will continue to require Government support to deliver.
- 1.4. Previous schemes have separated trees and woods from farming. Many land-managers have both woods and agricultural land on their holdings and need to make decisions across their landholdings. The natural environment operates across landscapes and catchments, so integration of public policy makes much greater sense, both ecologically and practically. Any future arrangement should constitute an integrated land management scheme that fully enables the benefits of trees – at a variety of scales – to be accessed by everyone.
- 1.5. We need environmental protection and restoration to be valued for the positive and long lasting impact it will have on long term productivity – not seen as a “nice to have”, and we strongly believe that this Bill has the potential to do this.
- 1.6 **“I went to the Agroforestry Conference and it really opened my eyes. I went back and planted 60 hardwood trees and 500 metres of hedgerow.”** Richard Bower (Farmers Weekly Rising Star - He studied at Harper Adams)

2. Not just agriculture

- 2.1. For this Bill to be effective it has to be more than just an “agriculture” bill in the narrow definition of the Common Agricultural Policy, and apply to all land management. This is an unprecedented opportunity to break down the barriers, for example, that have artificially divided farming and forestry for so long, and bring these mutually beneficial areas together through integrated thinking and delivery.

2.2. A sustainable environment is the basis of our prosperity and essential to the health and wellbeing of society. We would strongly suggest that the title of the proposed Agriculture Bill should be changed to a Sustainable Land Management Bill (SLMB). The SLMB would more accurately reflect the broader variety of land management options that fall within the compass of the Bill and would also recognise that there is a need to embed sustainable principles more fully into any kind of land management.

2.3 We would also welcome a broader statement of purpose for the Bill which recognises the need to take this opportunity to move to a sustainable land management approach if we are to deliver a promising future for future generations.

3. Environment versus productivity

3.1. We are also disappointed with the initial structure of the Bill which appears to reinforce the artificial distinction between environment and productivity and continue the message that all beneficial work for the environment is always undertaken at a cost to productivity. There is a growing scientific evidence base to show the opposite is true.

3.2. For example, we can show that the introduction of trees into intensively farmed landscapes, via agroforestry techniques, can result in positive responses across a variety of sustainability measures including soil health, animal welfare and production, creating a win-win situation.

“it’s getting more for the same area – through three dimensional farming, while helping risk manage against climate change by having a mix of perennials and annuals.”

Stephen Briggs, farmer, on introducing apple trees to an arable farm in Cambridgeshire

3.3. Agroforestry is the deliberate integration of trees and woods into land management so that they are an essential part of everyday management of the land. Agroforestry is not just alley cropping – it is trees in pasture, hedges, shelter belts or grazed woodland.

3.4. Equally, bringing previously unmanaged woods back into sustainable management, if done well, can bring biodiversity benefits as well as delivering fuel and other productive benefits.

3.5. The Woodland Trust believes that this could be tackled in a broader statement of purpose in the Bill.

4. Funding

4.1 As a long-term industry, land managers need to be able to plan with certainty over the funding available if they are to engage in a future policy with confidence. At present, the Bill is silent on this key issue. Although multi-annual contracts with Government may provide a degree of certainty for individual farmers and land managers, certainty is also needed for the sector as a whole. This funding should also provide for good quality, consistent advice accessible to all land managers.

4.2 Funding for transport infrastructure, international aid and, most recently, social housing, have all been set and guaranteed beyond the lifetime of the current Parliament. If the Government is asking farmers to invest in a new scheme, it must follow this precedent and provide the certainty and security of long-term funding.

- 4.3 We strongly believe that the Bill should place a duty on Ministers to set multi-annual budgets that reflect the scale of financial need associated with relevant policy objectives, set the timeframe over which these budgets would be set, and provide a means by which funding would be allocated between the four countries of the UK.
5. Regulatory baseline
- 5.1. Although recognised as of crucial importance in the policy statement published by Defra alongside the Bill, the Agriculture Bill does not provide the necessary powers to secure a strong regulatory framework for land management. Without a strong baseline of properly enforced regulatory standards, regardless of receipt of financial assistance, any public investment will be undermined.
- 5.2 In particular we need to ensure that there is a clear and transparent regulatory framework that applies to all rural land management and is enforced equally for all.
- 5.3 We believe that the Bill should provide a requirement and the powers necessary to secure strong regulatory protections for farming, environment, and access to the countryside.
6. Targets for delivery
- 6.1 To provide a framework for future investment, we need ambitious and measurable targets to contribute to the delivery of relevant national and international targets and goals. The Bill should include targets for existing commitments as well as new ambitious targets that are needed for nature's recovery and a healthy environment. This would drive policy ambition in the future and ensure these aims are not simply reliant on Ministerial goodwill. Such targets, with milestones, have proved effective under bodies such as the Committee on Climate Change.
- 6.2 We believe that the Bill should require Ministers to develop and report on measurable targets relevant to those purposes set out in the Bill.
7. Public Goods
- 7.1 The Woodland Trust supports the public goods identified as suitable for support under the Bill. Public goods are those which everyone can access (in theory) and from which no-one can be excluded and for which there is no market. The use of the term "public good" is poorly understood by non-economists, which has led to ongoing queries about why food production is not in the list. Any future policy development will need to be much more explicit about the definition of public goods.
- 7.2 The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO) defines food security as..."**when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life**"².
- 7.3 Food security is a complex issue, operating at all levels from local to global, to which there is no simple solution – poverty, inequality, utilisation and lack of access to nutritious food all play a role.

² UNFAO (2003) Trade reforms and food security. FAO Corporate Document Repository. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e00.htm>.

- 7.4 Food security is also often conflated with the idea of self-sufficiency. The difference is that food security is about ensuring access to food both now and in the future; whereas self-sufficiency demands food is produced domestically. The UK is currently 76% self-sufficient in food.³
- 7.5 Building a sustainable food and farming system whilst protecting and enhancing the natural environment “asset base”, such as soil, pollinators and water, will be fundamental to retaining our ability to produce food in the future.
- 7.6 Having access to an adequate supply of nutritious food is a basic necessity for humanity but evidence shows very clearly that a self-sufficiency policy would be a highly inefficient and cost-ineffective way to achieve this. Notwithstanding the costs of such a policy, complete self-sufficiency in food is also highly unrealistic given the globalised food market and consumer demand for out of season products or those not produced in the UK.
- 7.7 Instead the UK should focus on sustainable land management that supports UK farming for the long term, along with ensuring food waste is reduced, and food imported from overseas is produced to a high standard. In this way, the long term resilience of the supply chain will be much stronger, and in addition the system will support the wider benefits that a healthy natural environment offers such as clean air, clean water etc.

8.0 Design of schemes

- 8.1 While the bill gives the Secretary of State power to pay for environmental public goods it does not provide details on how this could be achieved which has contributed to unease in land managers
- 8.2 The change in offers the opportunity to provide a range of targeted support in different combinations of according to the public good outcomes to be delivered including capital payments, advice and long-term management payments⁴
- 8.2 Unsurprisingly, many of our land management contacts have views on the future options for a new environmental land management scheme:

“we need to be moving from models which are punitive to models which reward”

“enable public/private partnerships – does not all have to come from Government but policy must enable it”

“this should be driven by outcomes”

“locally managed and flexible”

“Water quality and flood risk are huge and growing issues for my farm. It is crazy that this only seems to be on the agenda when a flood happens or there’s a big pollution incident, rather than helping us to prevent it in the first place. Funding to plant trees could be part of the solution”

³ Defra British Food and Farming at a Glance, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515048/food-farming-stats-release-07apr16.pdf

⁴ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/publications/2018/04/sustainable-land-management-april-2018/>

8.3 We believe that all the public goods listed in the Bill can be delivered at both the individual holding level or as part of a larger, more co-ordinated package.

8.4 The impacts will vary not only as a result of scale but also level of activity undertaken. The research undertaken at Pontbren, in the Welsh uplands, has shown the significant impacts on both water quality and quantity that can be achieved by increasing overall woodland cover from 1.5% to 5% on both individual holdings and across a landscape.

8.5 Within our own consultations there have been differences between land managers as to preferences on the length of the transition, with some wanting to get it over as soon as possible and some wanting it staged more slowly. The difference was both generational, with older members wanting more time to adapt and the younger wanting change now; and sectoral, according to how important subsidies are in the business model currently being used. But they all agreed on the paramount need for a clear timeframe.

8.6 One of our farmer consultants stated:

“providing clear information on the direction of travel will provide certainty and enable stability.”

8.7 We strongly support the move towards a public money for public goods framework

Conclusion

A new integrated approach to land use requires support for positive land management that must deliver public goods. The Woodland Trust believes that to achieve a fully resilient landscape that delivers for all our needs, we must include support for actions that will protect and enhance the role of trees, woods and forests in ecosystems, as part of habitat networks and as a component of productive land management for both agriculture and forestry.

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