

BUILDING A FUTURE FOR BRITISH FARMERS

*FOOD SECURITY AND FARMING IN A CLIMATE
AND NATURE CRISIS*



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The Labour Party has long been committed to integrating progressive nature policies into its political agenda, reflecting a historical dedication to just and fair transitions amid economic transformations. With a focus on food, farming, and land, the party has an opportunity to drive crucial reforms addressing public health, climate change mitigation, nature restoration, a thriving domestic farming industry, and reinvigorated rural economies.

Intensive agriculture in the UK is a major cause of nature loss and river pollution. It also poses challenges to farmers who grapple with the impacts of a changing climate, complex supply chains, and inflationary pressures on agricultural inputs. This broken and unfair system, influenced by dominant corporate interests and historic EU agricultural policies, prioritises production over sustainability. Further intensification is predictably presented as a solution, yet rather than support farm businesses, in reality, intensification will only increase farm vulnerability.

Agricultural intensification is a key driver of nature's decline, and degraded habitats, water pollution, poor soils, and declines in beneficial insect populations all exacerbate climate impacts. Current land management practices contribute to the very biodiversity and climate crises that undermine farm profitability and long-term viability.

Despite these challenges, many farmers are already adopting nature-centric approaches to sustainable food production. Farmland accounts for 69% of land use in the UK¹ and this presents a huge opportunity for farmers to play a critical role in securing nature and climate recovery whilst avoiding pollution and increasing nutritional food security. However, systemic changes are needed.

1. Empower farmers to tackle the Climate and Nature Emergencies

Farmers are on the frontline of the climate emergency. Policies which embed agroecological and regenerative farming practices across all farm businesses are urgently needed to provide these farmers with the tools they need to adapt and manage resilient businesses, moving away from intensive farming and its reliance on fossil-fuel based agrochemicals to provide soil nutrients, support crop development, and manage pests and disease. In many cases farmers should be supported to phase out altogether the costly use of agrochemicals, reducing business spend and improving profitability².

By working with nature, farmers can instead enhance the natural assets on their land, providing flood water storage, carbon capture, or other measures which contribute to society's climate resilience. Building soil health is key to many of these outcomes, preventing soil degradation which has been calculated to cost the £1.2 billion every year across England and Wales³.

- Significantly expand agricultural advice with the creation of a Nature-Positive Farming Advisory Service to support farmers to access schemes.
- Review the Sustainable Farming Incentive – embed a whole farm approach, and provide a clear ladder of ambition for a transition to climate-neutral and nature-friendly farming.
- Ensure farmers with high ambition for nature or climate, including approaches like organic, are justly rewarded through Countryside Stewardship and the Landscape Recovery scheme.
- Ensure the agriculture budget is being well spent and provides the scale of investment needed to secure the environmental public goods society demands and to achieve net zero⁴.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agricultural-land-use-in-the-united-kingdom/agricultural-land-use-in-united-kingdom-at-1-june-2022>

² https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Farming%20at%20the%20Sweet%20Spot_1.pdf

³ The total costs of soil degradation in England and Wales – ScienceDirect

⁴ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/Finance%20for%20UK%20Environmental%20Land%20Management%2C%20June%202023.pdf>

2. Secure a sustainable & resilient Food System

Healthy soils, clean and plentiful water, and thriving insect populations are the foundation of our farming system – yet are threatened by climate change and ecological breakdown, which represent the greatest threat to UK food security. Significant impacts on food production are already evident. The long, sweltering summer of 2018, the warmest on record, saw onion yields down 40%, carrot yields down 25% and potato yields down 20%. £8bn of UK food imports are also threatened by worsening floods, droughts and heatwaves⁵, and without urgent action to address the climate and biodiversity crises, these risks will only increase.

Pitting food production against nature is a dangerous distraction. The UK Food Security Report states that *“Food security rests ultimately not on maximising domestic production ... but on making best use of land types”*. Around 40% of farms will need to be in higher ambition environmental schemes to halt the loss of species abundance by 2030.

- Put in place a Soil Health Action Plan for England with the ambition to ensure 100% of agricultural soils are in sustainable management.
- Adopt a Land Use Framework to help to manage the competing pressures on land, with a key focus on farmed land in relation to food, nature, and climate mitigation.
- Regulate supply chains and markets and build nature and diversification into domestic production, to help deliver healthy food by creating a more resilient food system.

3. A Just Transition to deliver public services & strong rural economies

An effective, well designed and ambitious future for rural communities will unlock exciting avenues for innovation, jobs and growth. All of the credible models for achieving net zero propose land use changes for nature to some degree⁶, requiring that some land is partly or wholly removed from agricultural production and restored for nature to sequester carbon. This presents an opportunity to reinvigorate nature-depleted and socially-isolated rural communities, generating vibrant and nature-rich local economies.

New employment opportunities, from agroforestry to natural capital advice to new local marketing, could create 10,000 jobs in the short-term and a further 15,000 in the long-term, and place a future Government on track to meet key climate, biodiversity, tree planting, sustainable farming and wellbeing targets⁷. More local and regional sustainable food systems, which can better support farmers, could create ~200,000 more jobs according to work by the RSPB and Sustain⁸.

- Ensure a just transition for farmers and workers through refreshed ELM schemes, with new resources for advice and skills training.
- Create significant new job opportunities by boosting higher-ambition farming & landscape-scale nature-recovery schemes, with a specific uptake target of at least 3,000 Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier and Landscape Recovery agreements per year.
- Develop a whole food systems approach, providing the necessary infrastructure and markets for farmers to process and sell their produce in local communities, leading to new employment opportunities and enhancing farmer profit.

⁵ <https://eciu.net/analysis/reports/2023/climate-impacts-on-uk-food-imports>

⁶ see <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/sixth-carbon-budget/> and <https://www.iddri.org/en/project/net-zero-agriculture-2050>

⁷ https://www.wcl.org.uk/assets/uploads/img/files/Letter_presenting_compendium_2.pdf

⁸ Government backing for local food infrastructure could create 200,000 jobs and help restore nature | Sustain (sustainweb.org)

4. Strengthen protections for People and Nature

Water pollution is one of the greatest and most widespread threats to species and habitats in the UK, including those within protected areas. In England and Wales, only 14% and 46% of rivers respectively meet the standards for good ecological status, largely as a consequence of intensive agricultural practices and excess nutrients.

Too often, this is driven by large profiteering agri-corporations which exploit weak regulatory protections, putting short-term profit ahead of long-term sector sustainability. Not only does this contribute to the appalling state of our rivers, but it undercuts those farm businesses which are playing by the rules. A fair and robust regulatory baseline would also result in better value for money for taxpayers, compared to paying for very basic actions in ELM schemes.

Fair regulation should include greater focus on supply chains, food traders, manufacturers, and large retailers to ensure farmers are not given unnecessary demands and receive a fair return from the market (a £120bn food sector).

- Set a fair but firm baseline for all farm businesses, to make polluting businesses pay for the damage they cause, and to create a level playing field to ensure those farmers who are doing more for nature are not undermined.
- Plug the gap left by the end of cross compliance⁹, by copying existing EU standards on Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions into domestic law.
- Ensure appropriate resourcing and funding to properly monitor and robustly enforce against the regulatory baseline.
- Strongly regulate supply chains – through enhancing the Groceries Supply Code of Practice and GC Adjudicator powers and by promptly introducing new sector based rules anticipated in the Agriculture Act 2020 to remove abusive supplier practices and unnecessary specifications and supply demands.

5. A Progressive Food Policy for People and Farmers

Implementing key recommendations from Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy Review will help farmers to unlock fair rewards from the market, and improve access to healthy, sustainably-produced food. A widespread shift towards more sustainable dietary choices is recognised as vital to outcomes for public health, nature's recovery, and carbon reduction.

Introduce a new National Food Strategy to ensure a coherent approach to supplying sustainable, healthy and fairly traded food for all.

- Ensure all public sector food procurement policies support healthier, nature and climate friendly diets by sourcing food from nature-friendly farming systems.
- Develop clear minimum standards for imports, to ensure British farmers are not undercut by imports produced to lower environmental and animal welfare standards.
- Introduce legislation for mandatory food labelling that empowers individuals to make healthier and sustainable dietary choices, supports businesses to make more sustainable sourcing decisions, and incentivises farmers and producers to be a part of the change.

6. Embrace responsible innovation

New technologies which bolster crop resilience to climate change can help the UK improve food security and achieve climate and nature outcomes, but they will not be a "silver bullet" to solving the complex issues currently faced by our food and farming systems. If novel technologies are utilised to further increase intensification of the farmed environment, they will serve only to exacerbate existing problems in our food systems.

- Champion a transparent, evidence-based approach to decision-making on innovation in farming and food, founded on the Precautionary Principle.
- Ensure decisions on research and development spend prioritise society's and farmers' needs.

⁹ <https://ieep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Post-EU-exit-Regulatory-Framework-Final-Jan-2020.pdf>