

RSPB Scotland and Farming

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK's largest conservation charity. We manage over 72,500 ha across 79 reserves in Scotland, where we protect and restore important habitats and contribute to the conservation of the species that depend on them. Many of our sites are designated for their conservation importance and hold species which are rare or for which Scotland is internationally important. Four of our reserves are operated as in-hand farms where livestock and crop production play an essential role in achieving nature conservation outcomes. We also work closely with farmers and crofters who bring livestock onto our land to graze and through provision of advice and collaboration, throughout Scotland.

Our own farming activities

1. Loch Gruinart and The Oa, Isle of Islay

On the Isle of Islay, RSPB runs two in-hand farming operations. RSPB owns the land, the stock, the machinery and employ staff. Aoradh Farm forms part of the 1700ha RSPB Scotland Loch Gruinart Reserve and as well as being an important habitat for geese it also holds important numbers of waders, corncrake, hen harrier and chough. At the RSPB Oa reserve we manage 2000ha of wild landscape important for chough, golden eagle, hen harrier and twite. We farm just over 200 cattle and 100 sheep at Loch Gruinart and 100 cattle and 400 sheep at the Oa.

Agricultural activity underpins conservation interests on Islay, and the cattle and sheep we rear play an important role in creating habitats for the range of species found on the reserves. However, it is important that both sites are run as successful working farms and the sale of the calves and lambs are an important income stream. More recently huge increases in the costs involved in farming, the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and an evolving agricultural policy platform has created a set of circumstances which require change. As well as ensuring our nature conservation objectives are upheld, we are adapting our operation to increase our efficiency and create more sustainable farming systems.

2. Onziebust, Egilsay

Our Onziebust reserve on Egilsay, part of the Orkney Islands, is 270 ha and covers more than 55 per cent of the island. We have 40 breeding cows and 150 breeding ewes on Onziebust, and crucially the means to deliver conservation grazing across the entire nature reserve. This has included restorative work on some historically undermanaged fields. Through a combination of cutting work with specialist machinery and cattle grazing we now have 100 ha of excellent wader habitat which in 2022 supported 245 pairs of waders, including lapwing and curlew.

Another key objective of our management is to demonstrate that nature friendly farming can deliver for biodiversity, whilst still producing results as a commercial agricultural operation. Most of our winter fodder is produced in house from botanically diverse grasslands and we hope this demonstrates that low input farming and conservation can sit side by side.

3. Oronsay, Colonsay

RSPB Oronsay is 573 ha. Sheep, and other livestock, are an important part of island life on Oronsay, in particular for chough, as they graze the grass to keep it at an optimum height for the birds to forage. Sheep are also vital as their dung provides an important food source for chough, which use their iconic orange bill to find invertebrates in the dung of livestock. Having a healthy herd of sheep to graze the grass on RSPB Scotland's Oronsay reserve is vital for chough to flourish across the wider

Special Protection Area. Nettle cover on the reserve also plays an important role in providing a secure habitat for visiting corncrakes.

You can watch a short film about the project on Oronsay [here](#).

Land used by graziers

Alongside in-house agricultural operations, we work with farmers and crofters across Scotland through rental grazier arrangements. This enables farmers and crofters to graze livestock on RSPB Scotland nature reserves, providing them with grazing and us the means to achieve conservation outcomes on our reserves. This serves as an example of close working relationships with the agricultural community, but also of how farming and nature conservation can work side by side.

RSPB Scotland has 83 grazing lets across 30 of our reserves, with a total area let of 8,039 ha. We also work with a small number of crofting communities across different areas of Scotland, usually through management agreements, for example at Balranald on the Uists.

Advisory work

As well as the above, we have a team of dedicated farm advisors who work with farmers and crofters and agricultural agents across the country. These advisors work with approximately 500-700 farmers and crofters per year and were involved in developing more than 200 Agri-Environment-Climate Scheme (AECS) agreements in each of the last two years. Whilst RSPB has the capacity to draw up agreements from scratch, the majority of these AECS agreements are developed collaboratively with agricultural agents from organisations including SAC Consulting and Scot FWAG. Our advisory staff provide specialist knowledge on Scotland's priority species including Black Grouse, Corn Bunting, Corncrake and waders alongside priority habitats such as species-rich grassland and machair. Our work is delivered across a number of landscape scale conservation projects supporting farmers and crofters in effectively delivering more for nature and climate on their land. Alongside work through AECS, RSPB advisory staff are also helping to deliver projects through other funding mechanisms and partnerships including NLHF funded Corncrake Calling.

Non-Scottish farming interests

- [Hope Farm](#) - Cambridge

Hope Farm is a 181 ha farm in south Cambridgeshire, bought by the RSPB in 2000. We bought the farm to research, showcase and influence nature-friendly farming. From 2000 – 2017, there has been a 213% increase in the numbers of butterflies at the farm and a 226% increase in the numbers of breeding farmland birds. Along with the arable land growing a variety of winter and spring crops, there is also permanent pasture, which is grazed by horses and sheep. Most recently the RSPB has introduced alley-cropping into the arable fields growing fruit and nut producing trees.

- [Geltsdale](#) - Cumbria

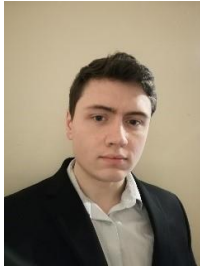
RSPB Geltsdale is a remote nature reserve containing 5,000 ha of heather moorland and farmland that encompasses two hill farms, Geltsdale and Tarnhouse. Moorland and woodland pasture habitats are grazed using cattle and innovative technologies in Nofence collars.

- [Lake Vyrnwy](#) - Powys

RSPB Lake Vyrnwy is 10,000 ha making it the largest organic farm in England and Wales. The farming activities benefit a range of farmland wildlife including birds such as curlews. These activities vary

from growing appropriate crops to managing river corridors, fencing woodlands and restoring walls and hedges.

For more information, please contact:



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Jack joined RSPB Scotland's Policy & Advocacy team in 2022, having previously worked in the Scottish Parliament as a Press & Digital Media Officer. He serves as the primary point of contact for MSPs and MSP staff.



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Vicki has worked on agriculture and land use policy at Scottish, UK and EU levels since the early 1990s. She has experience in the RSPB, NTS, IEEP and worked freelance for a period. Vicki has been Head of Land Use Policy for RSPB Scotland since 2009 and oversees the team's work on food and farming, forestry, climate and land use and nature policy.



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Andrew has been working on biodiversity, agriculture and land use policy since 2006. With previous experience in NatureScot, SRUC, Scottish Land & Estates and NFU Scotland, he works on future farming policy, climate and land use issues and moorland management.



Chris Bailey, Advisory Manager

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Chris has worked for RSPB since 2001. He is currently the Advisory Manager for RSPB Scotland managing a team of advisors who assist landowners providing advice and support on a range priority species including corncrake, corn bunting, waders and black grouse and priority farmland, upland and woodland habitats. He also spent 6 years managing RSPB's arable farm in Cambridgeshire qualifying as an agronomist.

The importance of land for achieving Net Zero in Scotland



SCOTLAND

Summary

- The land is the largest source and the biggest sink of greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland. Land use and management will therefore be central to reaching Net Zero by 2045.
- It is vital that the appropriate policies and funding are put in place to reduce emissions from the land and increase the sequestration or removal of carbon from the atmosphere.

Scotland's land is the biggest source of emissions

Under established emissions reporting categories, Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) is recorded as emitting 0.5 MtCO_{2e} in 2020ⁱ. This is, however, a 'net' figure that masks large emissions and large removals. Emissions from land in 2020 were estimated to be 12.4 MtCO_{2e}, whilst the removal of carbon from the atmosphere through things like tree planting or storage in soils was estimated to be -11.9 MtCO_{2e}. The emissions were larger than removals, hence the small net source of emissions from the LULUCF sector.

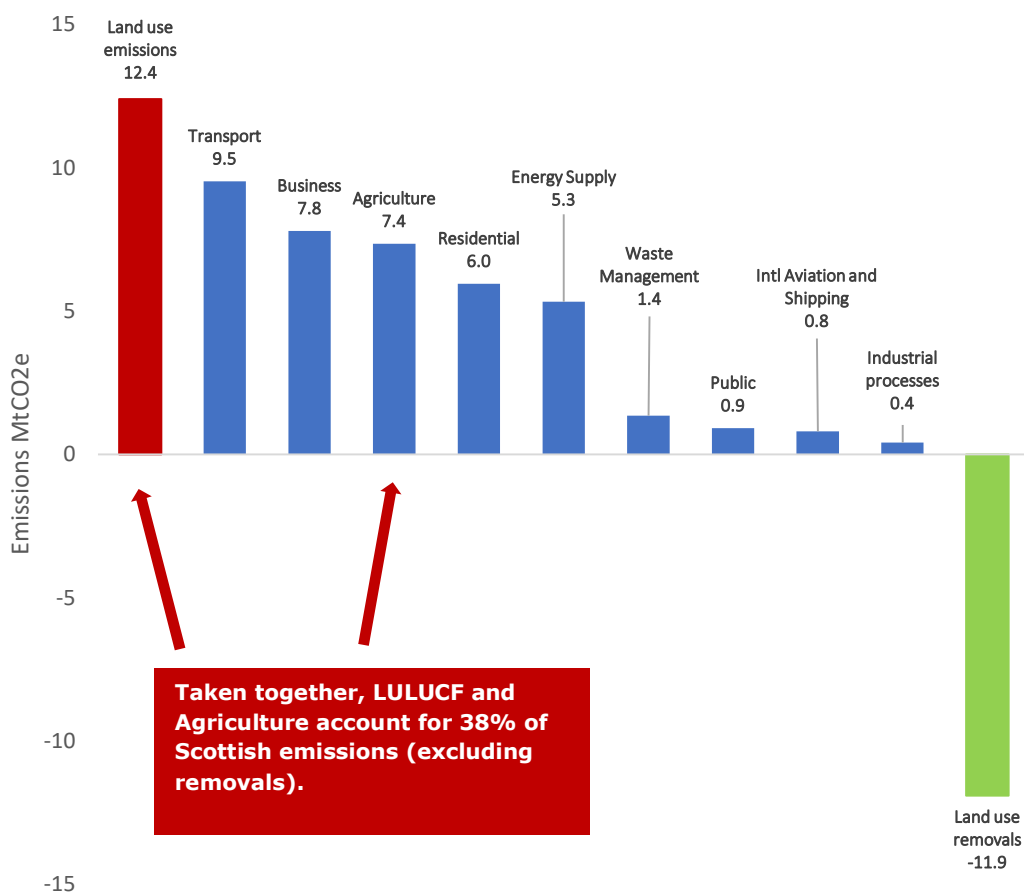


Figure 1: Scottish greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 (MtCO_{2e}). Source: Scottish Government.

Although the conventional way of reporting greenhouse gas figures is to show LULUCF as a net figure (which results in LULUCF appearing to be a minor source of emissions), when LULUCF emissions and removals are presented separately it

becomes clear that the land is the largest single source of emissions in Scotland. Importantly, although there are removals of carbon through sequestration in trees, for example, these removals do not mean that the emissions from damaged peatlands are not still happening elsewhere. While the presentation of LULUCF emissions as a net figure does make sense in some ways, not least because we are seeking to reach 'net zero', it is useful to see the emissions presented separately to the removals so that the scale of those emissions and removals is understood.

Changing land management to reach Net Zero

Land management has a critical role to play in meeting Net Zero. Land use will have to change significantly to meet climate targets. It is essential that emissions from the land and from farming are reduced and it is equally essential that sequestration of carbon in woodlands and healthy peatlands is increased. The Scottish Government does recognise the importance of reducing emissions from the land, and of increasing removals, but ambition could be higher, and progress is slow. Moving forward, the government must:

- **Increase efforts to restore peatland.** At present, the government is aiming to restore 250,000 ha of degraded peatland, but we have approximately 1.4M ha of degraded peatland to restore. The government should be aiming to restore all our peatlands to good health. This requires increased government and private funding, and it requires action in parallel such as to reduce deer numbers and more closely regulate muirburn.
- **Redesign farming policy and funding so that it drives emissions reduction in agriculture.** As the government creates a new funding regime for farming, it should raise the expectations of those receiving public money by improving the 'conditions' for eligibility so that the scheme delivers much better environmental outcomes and value for money; enhance funding directed at achieving targeted nature restoration and emissions reduction; and re-distribute the budget so that more funding is directed towards supporting transformation in the industry – environmental outcomes, but also advice, training, knowledge exchange and cooperation.
- **Adopt a much more strategic approach to land use change.** Reducing emissions from land and increasing sequestration and storage will involve land use change. Since that change could affect biodiversity and communities it is important that the implications of change are understood in advance and a strategic approach taken with supporting policies to mitigate any negative impacts. The government's Regional Land Use Partnership pilots are starting to move in this direction, but progress is slow and there is a lack of connection with wider policy changes.
- **Adopt a Right Place, Right Reason, Right Tree approach to afforestation and woodland creation.** A strategic approach to land use change means first considering whether trees are appropriate to a given place (i.e., not if it has pre-existing high carbon, high biodiversity or high food production value). If the place is suitable, then the best reason should be determined, for example in places adjacent to, or connecting, Ancient Woodlands, new native woodland creation for nature and carbon storage will be the best option. In other places the reason may be carbon sequestration and timber for carbon substitution with commercial plantations (which may be mixtures of native and/or non-native trees). Starting with decisions about Right Place and Right Reason then makes choosing the Right Trees relatively straightforward.

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Image credits: Images: Barley: Andy Hay; Heather: Sara Porter.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/news/scottish-greenhouse-gas-statistics-2020/>



Summary

Farming matters for nature

Most of the land in Scotland is farmed, which means that farming has a significant impact on the wildlife that lives on that farmland. While some farming activity can be essential to the maintenance of biodiversity, changing farming practices across Scotland over many years have also driven declines in biodiversity. Fortunately, farmers can reverse those declines by adopting nature-friendly farming practices.

Current Scottish agricultural policy is not fit for purpose

The existing agricultural policy and support regime in Scotland is an artefact of our involvement in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, which has long needed reform. While this policy has been changed over the years to improve its environmental performance, too much of the budget is devoted to payments that have a weak connection to public policy outcomes (basic payments, greening, LFASS and coupled support) and too little of the budget is devoted to delivering positive outcomes for nature and climate. Unfortunately, in the context of the nature and climate emergency, this means that the current policy is not fit for purpose.

Our thoughts on the government's proposals

- RSPB Scotland supports the vision of Scotland becoming a leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture, but we want to ensure that the enhancement of biodiversity is a central part of this journey.
- RSPB Scotland welcomes the prominence given to climate and nature.
- But RSPB Scotland is concerned that the pace of change is too slow.
- The four-tiered framework for future support payments has the potential to be able to deliver positive outcomes for nature and climate, but this is not guaranteed; positive outcomes will depend on the detail of scheme design and the distribution of the budget.

What do we want to see in the short-term (pre-Agriculture Act)?

- The government should offer full Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme rounds in the coming years.
- The government should consider capping current direct payments; the funds released should boost action for climate and nature.
- The government should invest now in enhanced advice provision, knowledge transfer and help with collaboration/co-operation in the supply chain and at a landscape scale.

What do we want to see in the Agriculture Bill?

- The Agriculture Bill should include a proper purpose clause.
- The Agriculture Bill should require the government to produce a strategic plan.
- The government should consider a programming period of 3-5 years.

What do we think future farm policy should look like?

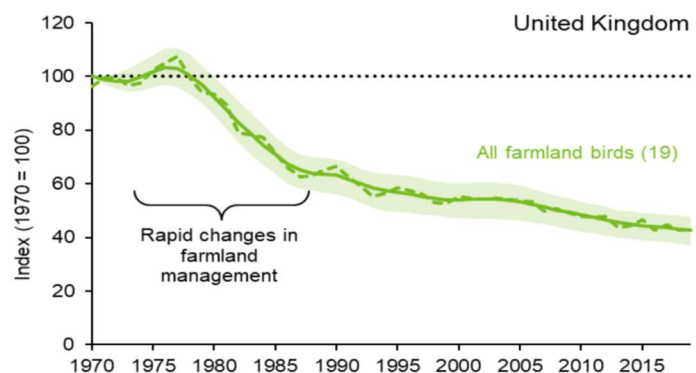
- The farming support budget should be maintained.
- A much smaller proportion of the budget should be allocated to base payments.
- A much larger proportion of the budget should be focused on nature restoration and emissions reduction.
- Much greater investment in supporting transformation in the industry as part of a Just Transition.
- We want to see effective support for High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems.
- Agricultural policy must be developed within a strategic approach to managing land use change.

Farming matters for nature

Farming matters for nature for two reasons: 1) changing agricultural practices have had a role in the biodiversity declines of recent decades, and 2) farmers are part of the solution and can reverse these biodiversity declines.

Changing agricultural practices and biodiversity decline

Most of the land in Scotland is farmed, which means that farming has a significant impact on the wildlife that lives on that farmland. While the interaction between farming and nature is complex, the overall picture is one of gradual decline. The [UK farmland bird index](#) shows the big picture for the UK as a whole. It shows that large changes took place through the 1970s and 80s with dramatic consequences for farmland wildlife. These changes included the increased use of chemicals, artificial fertiliser, changing cropping patterns, changing field structure and the loss of habitat.



In Scotland the picture since the mid-1990s is mixed. Some species, like goldfinch, whitethroat, reed bunting and buzzard, have been doing well, but others have suffered large long-term declines. [Between 1995 and 2020 Kestrel has declined by 65%, Curlew by 60%, Lapwing by 60% and Oystercatcher by 36%.](#) Other Scottish indicators show worrying trends too. Moths are sensitive to environmental changes and provide a good indicator of the health of our environment. Sadly, on average, [moth abundance has declined by 29% since 1975, and has almost halved since 1990 \(46% decline to 2018\).](#)

Farmers are part of the solution

This nature loss is not farmers' fault. Farmers have simply been doing what our government, the food retail market and consumers have asked of them. For decades, EU agricultural policies drove increased food production to feed a growing population, but not without unintended consequences on nature and the environment that now need to be addressed. In the context of the nature and climate crisis, a new policy direction is required, and farmers are an essential part of the solution.



Farmers across the country already demonstrate their willingness to try and reverse biodiversity decline. For example, farmers are playing a critical role in improving the fortunes of the corn bunting. The UK population fell by 89 per cent between 1970 and 2003 mainly because fewer seed and insect food sources were available to them on farmland. But thanks to the efforts of engaged farmers in Angus and Fife, Scottish corn bunting numbers have increased by 18% over the last three years and 222% since

2008. For more widespread success of this sort, the policy and funding framework needs to support and encourage farmers to undertake this beneficial activity.

Scottish agricultural policy is not fit for purpose

The existing agricultural policy and support regime in Scotland is an artefact of our involvement in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy; when the UK left the EU the legislative framework was retained in our law and so we still operate under the CAP framework. Unfortunately, that policy has long needed reform. While the CAP was altered over the years to improve its environmental performance, the overarching objective was to protect European farmers and maintain the status quo. Yet we know that, in the context of the nature and climate emergency, the status quo is not an option; current policy is just not fit for purpose.

There are several things wrong with current agricultural policy and funding:

- More than three quarters of the budget is devoted to payments with a weak connection to outcomes (basic payments, greening, LFASS and coupled support) and very limited monitoring of impact to assess value for public money.
- Although framed as 'income support', direct payments are not targeted at those in most need; rather they are targeted at those with better land and more business choices.
- Direct payments have very low eligibility requirements and deliver very little environmental benefit and Greening payments deliver only a small environmental benefit, especially considering the size of the annual spend on this type of payment.
- Too little of the budget is devoted to supporting land management that benefits nature and helps to address climate change.
- Too little of the budget is devoted to advice, training and knowledge exchange.
- There are very limited mechanisms that encourage and support farmer cooperation.

Our thoughts on the government's proposals

While the current policy and funding framework will be retained in the immediate future, the government has set out its [vision](#) of Scotland becoming a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture and proposed a four-tiered framework for future support payments (including Base, Enhanced and Elective Payments plus Complementary Support). The government has also proposed timescales for change with initial conditionality enhancements in 2025, Enhanced Payment roll out in 2026 and possible changes to the delivery of base payments after 2027. In this context, we offer some observations:

1. **RSPB Scotland broadly supports the government's aspiration to see Scotland become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture** – We broadly support the vision because it suggests a step in a positive direction. However, 'sustainable' and 'regenerative' agriculture are very broad terms with ongoing debate about what they mean. While we support the changes that a shift to regenerative agriculture would involve (such as a reduction in the use of inorganic nitrogen), this concept tends to be primarily about soil health and less about biodiversity. We believe that the enhancement of biodiversity must be an essential part of 'sustainable and regenerative agriculture'.
2. **RSPB Scotland welcomes the prominence given to climate and nature** – Not only is this a recognition of the challenges that we all face, it also strongly connects farm payments with a public outcome. We believe that farmers have a huge role to play in tackling society-wide issues and that connecting investment of public money in farming with the nature and climate emergency is the best way to defend ongoing public investment in the long run.

3. **The pace of change is too slow** – The forthcoming Bill will not drive change until beyond 2025, yet we know that change is needed rapidly. The [Climate Change Committee](#) recently highlighted the lack of a tangible plan for agriculture as a critical issue in terms of reducing emissions and meeting targets. Although emissions from agriculture only fell by 4% between 2010 and 2020, the government hopes to reduce farming emissions by 28% by 2030. For this to be achieved immediate action is needed. The government is testing ideas with farmers through its National Test Programme, but greater urgency is required.
4. **The four-tiered framework for future support payments has the potential to be able to deliver positive outcomes for nature and climate, but this is not guaranteed** – The degree to which the four-tiered framework (including Base direct payments, Enhanced direct payments, Elective Payments and Complementary Support) will deliver change to reverse biodiversity declines and reduce emissions depends on the design of the schemes. The government could design these tiers in such a way that it leads to limited change. But if it chooses to it could design schemes that do deliver real change. Key decisions will relate to the eligibility of farmers, activities and land; baseline entry requirements (conditionality); and the distribution of the budget between the different tiers.

What do we want to see in the short-term (prior to Agriculture Act powers)?

The forthcoming Agriculture Bill is unlikely to complete its passage through parliament before spring/summer 2024 with future schemes only becoming gradually operational after 2025. Yet we know that urgency is required. The Climate Change Committee has recently highlighted that the government urgently needs a clear plan for reducing emissions. Consequently, the government must use existing powers to drive change.

1. **The government should offer full Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme rounds in the coming years** – Pressure on budgets has led to restricted rounds of the Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme, with limited options available to applicants. Although the government has committed to continuing with the scheme, it remains unclear whether full funding rounds will be offered. We believe these are essential and that funding should be found to ensure that the scheme operates properly. A multi-annual scheme like AECS can give a degree of certainty and continuity to farmers at what is an uncertain time.
2. **The government should use existing powers to cap direct payments and use the funds released to boost action for climate and nature** – The government has the power to alter the payments that farmers receive through Retained EU law relating to the Common Agricultural Policy. The government should utilise these powers to cap (limit) payments over a certain size to release funds from the direct payments budget so that they can be used to fund nature and climate action and to fund transformational change in the industry. Modelling should be undertaken to determine the appropriate level at which to set a cap on payments which act, effectively, as a farm income support.
3. **The government should invest now in enhanced advice provision, knowledge transfer and help with collaboration/co-operation in the supply chain and at a landscape scale** – We know that advice provision is critical to the delivery of public outcomes such as reduced emissions and enhanced biodiversity, but current funding for advice is inadequate. Funding needs to be released now to enhance the supporting infrastructure that will help the industry change.

What do we want to see in the Agriculture Bill?

The government clearly needs the powers to implement agricultural policy and we agreed with much of the recent consultation, but there are some issues that we would raise:

1. **The Agriculture Bill should include a proper purpose clause** – Purpose clauses are included in legislation to provide a clear statement of intent. A clear purpose clause would help ensure that the legislation delivers change for nature and climate as intended. If the Bill grants powers to government in the absence of a clear vision or plan, there is little to anchor those powers and focus them on particular outcomes. A purpose should state clearly that support for agriculture in Scotland must deliver public policy objectives including the protection and recovery of the natural environment, reductions in carbon emissions and adaptation to climate change.
2. **The Agriculture Bill should require the government to produce a strategic plan** – While the government's vision for agriculture is positive, it is not clear what being a world leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture will look like in practice in 10- or 15- years' time. This lack of clarity is problematic. A vague vision allows a great deal of latitude in terms of policy choices and could allow the continued use of poor policy mechanisms. The Bill should require the government to produce a strategic plan that identifies the desired outcomes, sets clear objectives and targets and justifies the choice of policy mechanisms to achieve them. Such a plan should come before Parliament for scrutiny.
3. **The government should consider a programming period of 3-5 years** – In its recent consultation, the government emphasised that the forthcoming Agriculture Bill should be drafted in such a way as to allow it flexibility to change the policy and funding regime over time. This desire for flexibility is reasonable. As the context changes, or as our knowledge changes, the government may want to alter or update the agricultural policy and support framework. Yet at the same time, farmers need a degree of certainty. For farmers it is important that schemes do not chop and change from year to year. As such, the government should consider establishing a regular programming period which links with the strategic plan that the government would produce and with proper monitoring of impacts and effectiveness of public financial investment.

What should future farm policy look like?

1. **The farming support budget should be maintained** – There is a strong case for investing public money in farming. At the same time as producing food, farmers and crofters have a vital role to play in helping tackle the climate and nature emergencies. But the policy and funding regime needs to be substantially reformed so that the provision of this public money is much more strongly connected with tackling the nature and climate emergency (see Annex I). We believe that this is in the industry's interest in the long run because a continuation of the current regime with its weak link between the budget invested and tangible outcomes is vulnerable to budget reductions and hard to defend.
2. **A much smaller proportion of the budget should be allocated to base payments** – Base payments are a poor policy delivery tool. They are only weakly connected to outcomes and while these payments are framed as 'income support', they are not targeted at those that need such support. Given that the government has signalled it intends to retain these payments, RSPB Scotland wants to see much higher level of environmental conditionality as a pre-requisite for eligibility for base payments and believes that these payments should be capped so that funds can be released and invested in other parts of the support regime.

3. **A much larger proportion of the budget should be focused on targeted nature restoration and emissions reduction** – This funding would still go to farmers; it would just be more clearly associated with the delivery of positive environmental outcomes and therefore better enable the industry to demonstrate the good it is doing.
4. **Much greater investment in supporting transformation in the industry** – This means a big expansion in the provision of advice, training, knowledge exchange, cooperation etc.
5. **We want to see effective support for High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems** – In some places a continuation of the farming activity is essential to maintaining the biodiversity interest. LFASS and Coupled Support are not good ways of supporting these farms being poorly targeted and production linked respectively. We would like to see the government develop a bespoke HNV support mechanism.
6. **RSPB Scotland believes that the government must develop agricultural policy within a strategic approach to managing land use change** – The Climate Change Committee says that reaching Net Zero will require widespread land use change with a reduction in livestock production, a reduction in red meat and dairy consumption and an expansion of woodland cover. This will be a challenge for the Scottish farming industry. A strategic and planned approach to this change is essential to avoid negative impacts for farmers and crofters and for wildlife. We believe that if it is undertaken in the right way, land use change could offer significant economic and employment opportunities for farmers and land managers through, for example, on-farm diversification, the development of more localised and shorter food supply chains, agroforestry and peatland restoration.

Tackling some prominent narratives head on

“Food production has been forgotten in agricultural policy” – One reaction to the recent consultation on the forthcoming Agriculture Bill was to suggest that food production had been forgotten. While climate and nature were given more prominence than they might have been in the past, we disagree with the suggestion that a greater focus on the environment somehow equates to a marginalisation of food production. The greater emphasis on climate and nature simply reflects the fact that previous iterations of agricultural policy did not deliver for climate and nature and the government has recognised that we now face an emergency.

We do not believe that we face a choice between food production and environmental improvements. Clearly, we need our farmers to be producing high quality food, but we also need this to be done in a more sustainable way. Indeed, a stable climate and healthy natural environment are prerequisites for farming and food production to take place successfully.

“We need to focus on food security” (and, implicitly, not on the environment) – The war in Ukraine and associated price increases have focused attention on our reliance on imports of both food itself and farming inputs such as fertilisers. This has led some to raise the issue of food security and argue that (1) farmers need ongoing support to underpin our current food production and (2) that environmental commitments reduce output and therefore threaten our food security. This is simplistic. Food security is about more than simply the amount of food produced. While this is a complex issue, we would flag two key points:

1. *It is important to be honest with ourselves about what happens to current Scottish agricultural output* – Research for one of the government’s [farmer-led groups](#) identified that approximately 79% of all the cereals grown in Scotland go to either alcohol production

or animal feed. At the same time, the vast [majority of lamb produced here is not consumed here](#). Just doing more of what we currently do will not necessarily improve food security. If we really are concerned about food security, we need to start by looking at our current food systems.

2. *Food production and food security is dependent on a healthy environment* – The UK’s first [Food Security Report](#) concluded that “[t]he biggest medium to long term risk to the UK’s domestic production comes from climate change and other environmental pressures like soil degradation, water quality and biodiversity”. Climate change and nature loss are already having an impact on farming. In 2017 alone [extreme weather contributed to losses of up to £161 million for Scotland’s farmers](#).

Food security fears should not push environmental concerns into the future. Our view is that a secure domestic and global food supply is reliant on a healthy natural environment and the resilience of the food system as a whole. Further degradation of our environment would make our food system more insecure. In order to improve food security, we need to ensure the healthy environment upon which farming itself depends.

“It’s the environmentalists versus the farmers” – While it can sometimes appear that environmentalists are in opposition to farmers because of the way debates get reported, it is important to remember that there is a quiet revolution already underway in the farming industry. The [Nature Friendly Farming Network](#) is a group of farmers who champion a way of farming which is sustainable and good for nature. The network continues to grow. There are also organic farming organisations and producer groups, pasture-fed livestock groups and regenerative agriculture groups. On the ground, many farmers are delivering environmental benefits simply because they want to. In 2022, there were over 900 applications for funding under the Agri-Environment and Climate Scheme. Many farmers care about the environment.

At the same time, we—the RSPB—are engaged in farming. RSPB Scotland manages four in-hand farming operations. In Scotland these are predominantly livestock units, but in England we have a large arable farm that we use to test ideas and demonstrate what can be achieved. We also have a team of dedicated farm advisors who work with farmers and crofters across the country. These advisors work with approximately 500-700 farmers and crofters per year and were involved in more than 200 AECS agreements in each of the last two years.

Any polarised characterisation of debates about farming policy does not therefore reflect reality. There are a wide variety of views on agricultural policy and they cannot be distilled into two opposing camps. Many farmers want reform just as much as environmental organisations.

The status quo is not an option

In the context of the nature and climate emergency, more of the same is not an option. The existing agricultural policy will not deliver the outcomes we need to see. The substantial public investment in farming – more than half a billion pounds each year – needs to deliver more for nature, climate and people. Small iterative tweaks to the existing regime are unlikely to deliver the required change. A step change in agricultural policy is required. This may present real challenges to the farming industry, so it is vital that any change is part of a Just Transition.

Who we are



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Jack joined RSPB Scotland's Policy & Advocacy team in 2022, having previously worked in the Scottish Parliament. He serves as the primary point of contact for MSPs and MSP staff.



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Chris Bailey, Advisory Manager Scotland

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Chris is the Advisory Manager for RSPB Scotland managing a team of advisors who assist landowners providing advice and support on a range of priority species including corncrake, corn bunting, waders and black grouse and priority farmland, upland and woodland habitats. He also spent 6 years managing RSPB's arable farm in Cambridgeshire.

Annex I: What do we want to see in future?

CHANGE FROM THIS

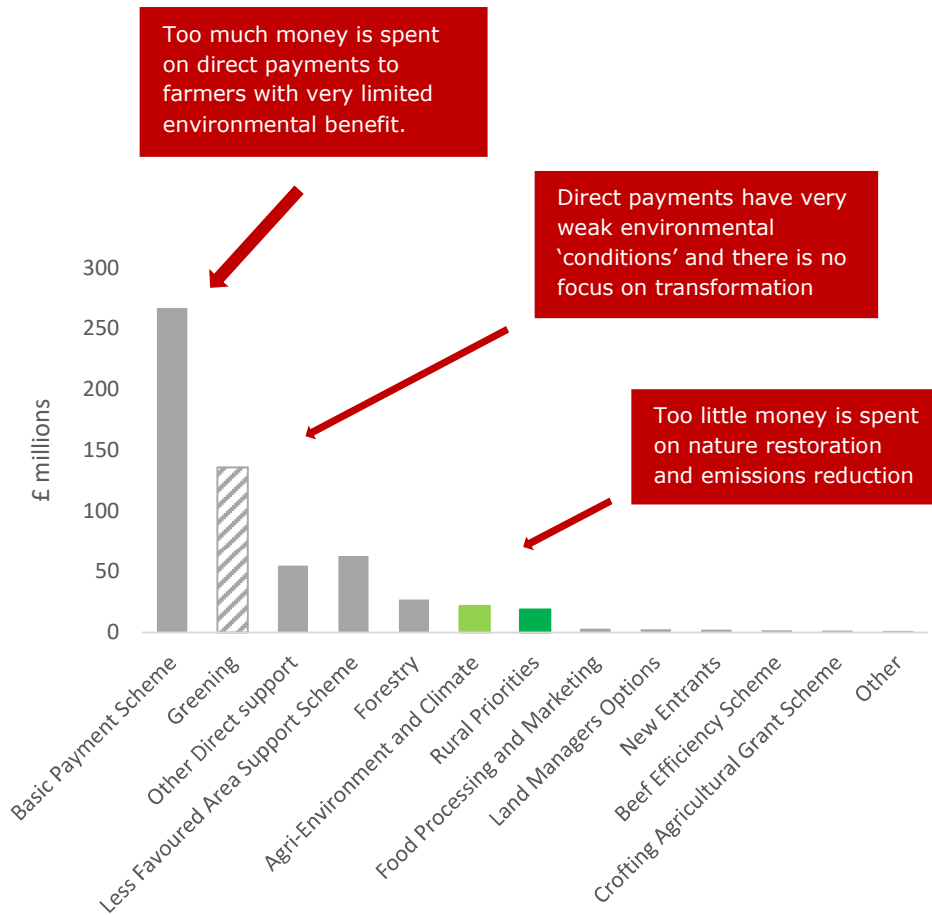


Figure 1: Farm support payments in 2019 by scheme (£m). Source: JHI.

TO THIS



Figure 2: Graphical representation of the future farming support budget.