



WITH MARTIN LINES

Nature NATTERS

Share with nature, share the responsibility

“ Many of you will have noticed the increased focus both in policy and in the media on how we use our land and what it can deliver for society. Whether it’s the Land Use Framework consultation or the advice the Climate Change Commission has recently given the government on its seventh carbon budget, farmers are no longer solely being asked to produce food from their land.

In days gone by we were guided by policy to produce as much food as we could in any given area of land, and this was pretty much the only goal. It didn’t matter how we did it – artificial inputs, sprays, heavy cultivations – as long as the yield was high.

But today, anyone who’s looked at the Land Use Framework consultation or been following the headlines around the carbon budget will know that we’ll all have to begin to consider, what else can we deliver from our land?

In the early years on my own farm, we focused on what paid us the most, which crop was the easiest to grow and whatever the ‘least effort’ option was. We never recognised our land as nature or habitats or tools for weather protection, and how, if nurtured, it can increase the productivity of the whole business.

Fast-forward to today and we’ve built more diversity into the land. We examine each pocket and consider what environmental

features or habitats could be added. It’s improving our resilience to climate change and delivering better outcomes for my crops.

Yes we’ve created habitats and increased biodiversity which has value in itself, but with that comes new beneficial insects and birds to eat the pests that blight my crops. Solitary bees, butterflies and beetles now have homes and can pollinate for me.

The trees we’ve planted soak up excess water from the extreme rains we’ve been seeing, also sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. Hedgerows we’ve restored help to slow the flow of air and minimise evaporation from the soil during the summer, giving us a few more opportunities for spraying as it provides a windbreak.

Some larger changes, such as creating agroforestry systems, require long-term thinking. These changes in approach mean possible changes to the machinery we use; who can predict what problems these new methods of working may cause?

If your soil is fertile and suitable for crop production, then your land may remain resilient to a change in climate and the amount of land taken out of crop production and into other uses will be minimal. But those areas of the farm that are less productive, and those farmers who operate in less favourable conditions, could embrace



Through creating habitats on farm, solitary bees, butterflies and beetles now have homes and can pollinate.

different opportunities. After all, not all farmers are regularly seeing 10t/ha or more in all of their fields.

Getting the balance right will be crucial – what works for one farmer may be different to another, and the benefits the land can deliver may also be different. It’s clear that we require a more diverse farmed landscape going forward, and there’s public and private finance available now and going forward to fund us and reward us for providing that.

For my job, I’m lucky to speak to many different farmers and agricultural organisations across the UK and the attitude to change is very varied. Many farmers seem to think: what’s this to do with me? I’m going to carry on as I always have done; thank you!

The problem is, if we don’t all make a contribution towards a more multifunctional landscape, it leaves other farmers to do a lot more than their fair share to reach the targets set for nature recovery, carbon sequestration and water quality. We must remember that these will all become income streams in the future – some already are

– with the implementation of SFI and other land management schemes.

As an industry, we’ll have to educate ourselves about the risks, benefits and opportunities of a more diverse landscape. There’s a steadily increasing library of technological tools and information available to make informed business choices that’ll help us to deliver a range of public goods alongside private goods and food.

By sharing our land with nature, we share the responsibility of creating a resilient future for farming together. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Martin Lines is an arable farmer and contractor in South Cambridgeshire with more than 500ha of arable land in his care. His special interest is in farm conservation management and demonstrating that farmers can profitably produce food in harmony with nature and the environment. He’s also chair of the Nature Friendly Farming Network UK. @LinesMartin martin.lines@nffn.org.uk.