

Conversations on land use



“Without farming businesses contributing and sharing what land use means to them, this will all become a very hypothetical exercise.”

ED BARKER

The government recently launched a consultation which should inform a new strategic approach to managing land use in England, culminating in the principles, advanced data and tools required to support decision-making for all involved. *CPM* delves into why farmers should contribute.

By Janine Adamson

As one of the recommendations made by Henry Dimbleby in the 2022 National Food Strategy, the government has finally launched a 12-week consultation which seeks the views of farmers, landowners, businesses and nature groups to help inform a Land Use Framework.

The aim of the exercise is to give decision makers the data required to protect England’s most productive agricultural land while helping to deliver

the different objectives which vie for it, including growing food, building 1.5M homes this parliament, delivering green energy and restoring nature.

STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

As part of the consultation, which includes an online portal with a questionnaire, workshops across the country will take place which the government says: “Will bring farmers and landowners to the table, to put the

insights of the people who manage our landscapes at the centre of our work to develop a final Land Use Framework.”

Furthermore: “Protecting UK food security and pursuing our mission for economic growth go hand-in-hand – with the highest quality agricultural land already protected for food production while kickstarting the economy by building new housing and rolling out renewable energy to make the UK a clean energy superpower.”

But why did Henry stress the importance of a Land Use Framework in the first place? Savills’ Kelly Hewson-Fisher says ultimately, the demands on farmland have shifted. “They’ve expanded to reflect broader economic, environmental and social priorities.

“Today, modern demands are far more complex, driven by climate change, environmental priorities and population growth. While food

Tailored bioscience nutrition key to maintaining wheat potential this spring

We have three situations in the field with our winter wheat crops this season.

We have some sensible-looking crops that went in quite well on relatively well-drained soil during the dry period in late October/early November, despite awkward conditions. These grew away before they got wet feet and have pretty good potential. However, they are very much the minority.

Many other crops are a mixed bag and a wall-to-wall crop in a field is a rarity. These have less potential due to wet patches and, in many cases, lost headlands. It is highly likely these crops will need some extra help in terms of nutrition as they are fairly backwards and lack vigour.

Then we have very late-drilled crops which have only just come through – some are still being drilled now (mid-February).

We are looking at three different management situations when it comes to nutrition. The first set of crops will be managed pretty much as normal.

With the more backward ones, we are going to have to feel our way through. Firstly, we need to improve the health of these crops, so they can pick up nitrogen and other nutrients more effectively, which will translate through to yield and hopefully provide a reasonable gross margin come harvest.

Early nitrogen will be key to encourage tillering, where fields will travel. There will be little if any residual N in the soil at the moment, given this is the second wet winter in a row.

Phosphorus is a key element when it comes to early growth, so we need to ensure plants are in the best shape to make the most of it.

Calfite Extra and Luxor from Agrovista's Innovation Range are going to be important on more backward crops and where soil indices are low, to pre-empt any deficiency rather than waiting for it to manifest fully.

I invariably use the two together. The phosphite element of Calfite Extra helps stimulate rooting and nutritional scavenging. Luxor increases phosphate delivery and the fulvic and humic acid components support microbial activity in the soil.

With that in mind, I will probably apply some L-CBF Boost early on as well on soils that have taken a hammering. This product is a food source for soil microbes and fungi, increasing their numbers which, in turn, improves the availability of key nutrients for the crop.

We have to pick and choose what we're going to do. Everything will be more case-by-case this season than it's ever been.

My overall approach is to try to maximise the genetic potential of the crop. I use sap testing in the field to measure available nutrition in the plant as close to real time as possible, which is key to optimising the expression of those genes in the field. We will be doing sap tests about a week or so ahead of T0, and the same ahead of T1 and T2.

Some of the very late crops are only on their way through, so we need to keep an eye on them. At least they will have missed the worst of the blackgrass!

They will need to be managed a bit differently again. Once they begin tillering we may well look at Calfite Extra/Luxor, because they are going to need an extra kick. We can then consider what other bioscience products we might need to apply to keep these crops moving at a good pace.

*Whilst this article is about nutrition, when it comes to plant protection products it is worth noting that late-drilled crops (sown after 31 January) are considered spring crops. Pesticide labels can differ considerably between winter and spring wheat.

Peter Waltham

Agronomist
Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset

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Lacking a cohesive strategy

According to AIC's Robert Sheasby, unlike some other countries, the UK lacks a joined-up, cross-government strategy on land use or food security.

- ▶ production remains a critical function, land use must accommodate so much more," she explains.

"Consequently, the consultation poses a chance to engage and it's an opportunity to look at how we might square a round hole."

In fact, it's a topic which has long been on the agenda for the Agricultural Industries Confederation (AIC), with the Land Use Framework

featured as one of the association's core asks of the new government during the 2024 General Election.

"It's encouraging that the government has recognised the challenges placed on land use arising from energy, housing, nature, and, of course, food production. Land is a finite resource and there are competing pressures on it," says AIC's chief executive, Robert Sheasby.

"What we do with our land matters for our economy, our productivity, our environment, and our people. Unlike some other countries, the UK lacks a joined-up, cross-government strategy on land use or food security – something AIC has long advocated. As such, we'll be working closely with our member businesses to feed into the consultation."

EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

However, given the consultation has taken 2-3 years to arrive, AIC's head of policy and external affairs, Ed Barker, says there has to be a level of expectation management. "Some might say it's already taken long enough, but the lag has been due to significant political shifts – namely the appointment of a new government – which isn't their fault.

"Equally, there may be an air of disappointment because the consultation and associated documents present a technical analysis based on need, rather than practical solutions which provide immediate answers," he explains.

However, Kelly stresses that the current consultation phase is a critical aspect of the framework's development. "In ways it's indicative of the complexity of the topic at hand, but also there'd be outcry if the government came straight out with dictatorial policy. This is farming's chance to be a part of the developmental process."

Furthermore, she highlights it could provide an ideal opportunity to reassess individual farming business strategies for a positive outcome. "We're in the middle of a transition which we have to embrace; change is inevitable and productivity will be key. Every farming business will have to look at its viability and profitability when it's no longer under-pinned by BPS.

"It's realistic to use the Land Use Framework as a basis to assess every hectare and its potential. I'm optimistic – this is bringing all land uses together on one platform. We now have to work together to understand how best to integrate them, and the

A farmer's perspective

It's important to not forget that the cornerstones of a healthy life are good natural food, clean water and peaceful sleep – all of these things begin on the land, says CPM columnist, Andrew Wilson of 'Talking Taties'.

A prosperous economy requires prosperous domestic businesses which are allowed to thrive, and in agricultural terms, a profitable farm is far better placed to invest in improved systems and to provide more for nature."

According to Andrew, many businesses depend on an effective and prosperous agricultural industry. "Flooding land reduces business viability, threatens homes and reduces natural diversity. So we require flood prevention measures from a proper managed river maintenance policy, not flood defences that'll continue to be overwhelmed as rivers silt up.

"One and a half million homes is a lot of people, a lot of run off, a lot of demand for clean water and

waste management – this is all too often overlooked. We have to store more clean water and manage waste water more responsibly."

In terms of energy production, Andrew believes plastic solar panels have a place on rooftops – particularly on industrial buildings – but not on food-producing farmland. "Water wheels used to power this country once upon a time, the water still flows yet investment in power from waste is desperately lacking.

"Feeding power stations that sit on coal fields with wood chip from thousands of miles away from a carbon point of view is ludicrous, we can do so much better."

He also perceives a problem in waste and its impact on land. "Food waste and



Green energy demands

Solar panels have a place on rooftops – particularly on industrial buildings – but not on food-producing farmland, believes CPM columnist, Andrew Wilson.

plastic proliferation is a major issue in this country and requires investment, utilisation, education and better management than simply dumping it all in landfill," concludes Andrew.



Embracing change

Farming is in the middle of a transition which has to be embraced; change is inevitable and productivity will be key, says Savills' Kelly Hewson-Fisher.

role in which innovation can help us to achieve that goal," proposes Kelly.

The Environment Agency's Alan Lovell agrees that the Land Use Framework could spark making smarter decisions. "It starts a vital national conversation about the scale of change required over time to meet and reconcile environmental goals for water, climate and nature with food production, housing and development.

"For example, by utilising low-grade agricultural land for natural flood management, we can reduce flood risk, enhance biodiversity, and create more sustainable landscapes. This kind of approach will help us

to meet the challenges of a changing climate while delivering real benefits for communities and the environment," he says.

According to Ed, new ways of thinking are pivotal given current productivity challenges. "The supporting documentation issued with the consultation assumes we can still find productivity gains in food production, based on trends from previous decades.

"However we know we've reached limits in certain areas, plus it doesn't factor in how demands have changed during those years. This means the perspectives of those at the fore are critical in explaining why certain approaches aren't viable, to share the

reality of how a farm is being utilised with those influencing policy who lack practical experience," he explains.

Acknowledging additional administrative burden in the form of an online questionnaire is unlikely to win farmers over, Ed suggests an alternative approach. "I don't envisage a problem in sending over a summary directly to the provided Defra e-mail address (landuseconsultation@defra.gov.uk).

"What I will say is, it'll help to have a level of understanding of the questionnaire and supporting documents rather than jumping on the headline figures reported in the media. The key point is, without farming businesses contributing and sharing what land use means to them, this will all become a very hypothetical exercise," he warns.

GROUP REPRESENTATION

Also taking the perspective of something is better than nothing, Kelly suggests another alternative means of providing feedback. "If you're part of a local farming group, nominate someone to take notes during a discussion and submit the commentary, or fill in the questionnaire, on everyone's behalf.

"Unless we engage, we won't be in a position to disagree with the end outcome. Given I feel as though the sector already has low confidence levels in government and that they aren't being listened to, we must avoid the framework becoming another knock."

Although taking a mostly positive view of the Land Use Framework, one

of Kelly's concerns surrounds where the policy will sit once cascaded down to a more local level. "When it comes to the crunch, these

are the individuals and authorities who make hard decisions regarding planning permission approvals, yet who are instructed to deliver the targets of central government at a practical level.

"Where will the Land Use Framework sit in their list of priorities? Where will it be in the hierarchy of needs?" she questions.

So what about other perspectives from beyond the farm gate? Tony Juniper, chair of Natural England, says too often the health of the natural environment, farming and ambitions for the built environment are presented as

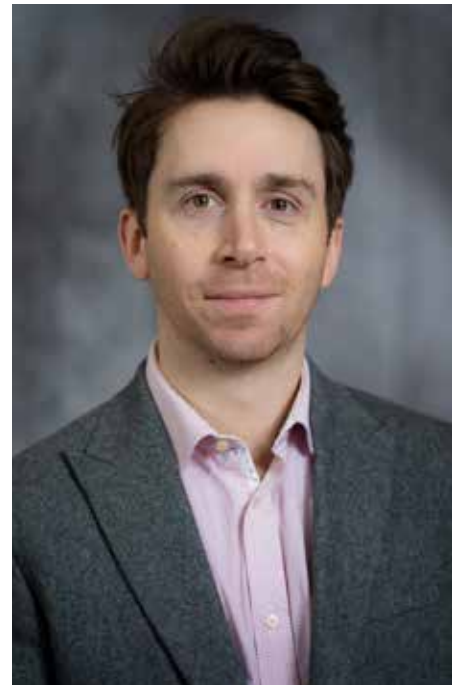
competing interests. "Thus protecting nature can be portrayed as a barrier to development and food security.

"The fact is though, we can and must do all of these things, and by taking a more strategic view of how we use land, we can deliver against the government's stretching legal targets to halt and reverse nature decline.

"The Land Use Framework is a vital step forward, offering opportunities to move beyond tired old binary choices – between housing and greenspace, or nature and food – and onto more integrated thinking that we must embrace in meeting multiple pressing challenges all at once," he says.

But at the heart of all decision-making are individuals, and therefore people. Ed says thankfully, the consultation has recognised this. "There's a cultural identity section which I'm very glad has been acknowledged. Food production is central to the identity of many farms and is a driver behind many rural businesses, I'm pleased this is on the agenda," he concludes.

Postal responses for the Land Use Framework consultation have also been welcomed, sent to: Land Use Consultation, Third Floor, Mallard House, Kings Pool, 1-2 Peasholme Green, York, YO1 7PX. The deadline for all correspondence is 25 April 2025. ●



Productivity gains

AIC's Ed Barker says the supporting documentation issued with the consultation assumes the UK can still find productivity gains in food production, based on trends from previous decades.