

The United Kingdom: Food and Land Use



Context

Agriculture in the United Kingdom comprises 70 percent of total land area, employs 1.5 percent of the workforce and contributes 0.6 percent of GDP. Despite high levels of skills and technology, fertile soils and subsidies, farmers' incomes remain comparatively low. These low earnings, as well as high land prices and a shortage of available farmland, have discouraged young people from joining the industry. Agriculture also accounts for 11 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and is the biggest cause of wildlife loss, with a 67 percent decline in the abundance of priority species since 1970 and 13 percent of these now close to extinction.

The United Kingdom's "food production to supply" (or self-sufficiency) ratio is estimated to be 61 percent for all food in 2018 and 75 percent for indigenous types of food. Decades of policy to produce cheaper food have led to environmental degradation and spiralling ill-health. Farm gate prices remain low: of the £121 billion agri-food sector in 2017, only 8.5 percent of this (£10.2 billion) was returned to agriculture, of which about £3 billion came from public subsidy. The United Kingdom has the third-cheapest food among developed countries, but the highest rates of domestic food insecurity in Europe (a function of wealth distribution and the ability of individuals to access healthy food). Meanwhile, issues of how best to use land are often a source of contention and polarisation.

The cost of one diet-related illness – Type 2 diabetes – to the National Health Service (NHS) is nearly £10 billion a year. Costs to the NHS attributable to obesity are projected to reach £9.7 billion a year by 2050, with its wider costs to society estimated to reach £49.9 billion a year.

The case for serious, urgent and systemic reform of food and land use systems is clear. The government's commitment to a net zero greenhouse gas emissions target by 2050, as well as its draft Environment Bill, includes ambitious goals for food and land use (which the National Farmers' Union in England and Wales has accepted and brought forward to 2040). England has commissioned a year-long consultation exercise to establish a National Food Strategy, while Scotland has proposed a Good Food National Bill.

Critical transitions

Each of the ten critical transitions is addressed in diverse national policies in the United Kingdom. Four of the most vital are:

1

Healthy diets. There needs to be an urgent national effort to make UK diets healthier and more sustainable, to make healthier food cheaper and more accessible, and overcome the obesogenic environment. Leeds City administration has achieved a 6.4 percent fall in child obesity by working with pre-school children. Initiatives such as parenting classes that encourage healthy snacking, eating as a family and the importance of cooking meals from scratch have achieved a nine percent reduction in some of the city's most vulnerable neighbourhoods.

2

Productive and regenerative agriculture. The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission sets out a plan for the greater adoption of regenerative farming practices, with some of these approaches also embedded in the government's draft Agriculture and Environment Bills for England. Particularly critical here will be the successful implementation of planned agricultural subsidy reform, linking payments more directly to the adoption of regenerative and environmental practices.

3

Protecting and restoring nature. The target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 will require an ambitious effort to plant 1.5 billion more trees and to protect and restore remaining ecosystems (including forests, woodlands and peatlands). The UK Government's Environment Bill and 25 Year Environment Plan include provisions on biodiversity net gain, environmental spatial planning, conservation covenants – encouraging landowners to protect biodiversity on their land – and improved fresh water management.

4

Protected and productive marine waters. The United Kingdom needs to move towards more sustainable management of its marine fisheries and waters, including by ensuring higher levels of protection and the establishment of "no take" zones to allow the recovery of depleted ecosystems, rebuild fertility and enhance resilience. This focus should extend to the Overseas Territories, where the government's commitment to a "blue belt" of marine protected areas needs to be strengthened with finance and enforcement.