



Rebuilding Agriculture

Key issues

Protection of natural resources – water, soil and air – is the cornerstone of the rural economy and a sustainable food chain. A thriving rural and agricultural economy is vital to the sustainability of the UK. Agriculture has a dominant influence on the rural environment and its land management role supports other sectors, particularly tourism. It is essential that farming is profitable, to support high quality land management and attract talented professionals into the industry.

Regulation of agriculture could be modernised if farmers took action to manage their environmental impacts. External regulation of agriculture could be minimised if land management is improved. Most regulatory effort can then be focussed on farms which need special help and attention or which present greater risks.

Priorities for agriculture should be reset towards environmental objectives. The mid-term review of agri-environment schemes, wider reform of the Common Agriculture Policy and new strategies for the future of farming and the countryside in England and Wales offer a special opportunity to improve the rural environment. The Agency has a central role in ensuring that these strategies and plans deliver protection and enhancement of natural resources.

The role of the Environment Agency

We are the principal protector of water, soil and air and have a key role in rural development and sustainable agriculture. Control of diffuse water pollution from agriculture is needed to improve river quality and protection of groundwater. Soil systems are subject to chronic degradation through erosion and organic matter loss. Agriculture is a significant source of greenhouse gases and of ammonia emissions to air. One of our priorities is to reduce polluting emissions from agriculture by raising environmental management standards on farms. We aim to achieve flood attenuation through planned and managed rural land use: inappropriate cultivation timing and methods can substantially increase surface water run-off. We work to protect and enhance biodiversity, especially in rivers and lakes, river corridors and wetland habitats.

As well as providing effective regulation, the Agency can contribute to new strategies for the future of farming through:

- authoritative descriptions of the state of the environment and its probable future trends;
- through setting priorities for improvements;
- and by proposing options for new measures within the England and Wales Rural Development Plans, backed by credible data and economic analysis.

As the Government's principal adviser on environmental policy, we recommend:

1. **An immediate expansion of funding for agri-environment schemes**, up to the 10 percent proposed by the Commission on the Future of Farming and Food. Funding should be increased to the 20 percent national discretionary limit under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) by 2006. At least half of CAP funds should go to the Rural Development Regulation following the next round of CAP reform (2007).
2. **New whole-farm agri-environment measures** that emphasise management of soil, water and air, with greater recognition of resource protection issues in Rural Development Plans following their mid-term review in 2003. A broad and shallow scheme under the Rural Development Regulations that supports development of environmental management plans for all farms, supported by advice. An industry-led whole-farm environmental management system supported by DEFRA. Within this, the progressive integration of existing and new regulations in to a single national delivery framework, to simplify regulatory processes for farmers.
3. **A Government sponsored environmental manager training scheme** for farm managers. Land management to meet future environmental standards will be technically challenging and will require new expertise.
4. **Properly funded advice provision, joining up environmental and business advice**, and making use of the best that innovative and diverse farming advisors currently provide.
5. **Support for low input precision farming systems** that can deliver high quality food with good yields and low environmental costs.
6. **Planning guidance, Rural Development Plan and legislation for the countryside** which ensures sustainable growth of rural populations, balanced land use and sustainable access to the countryside (angling, navigation, green tourism)

Background

- Direct subsidies from public funds (CAP) accounted for approximately 40% of farm incomes in 2000.
- Farm pollution from slurry and silage declined by 50% between 1988 and 1996, due to investment by farmers and Government but agriculture accounted for 27% of the serious (Category 1) and significant (Category 2) water pollution incidents from all sources in 2000.
- Nine percent of surface water and 12% of groundwater monitoring sites showed concentrations of pesticides over the EU Drinking Water Directive limits in 2000.
- Leaching and erosion of soil containing phosphate from agricultural manure and fertilisers contributes to the eutrophication of rivers and lakes. Excessive algal growth affects up to 200 freshwaters annually.
- Livestock farming was responsible for 85% of the UK's ammonia emissions in 1999. This makes up about half of the nitrogen deposition, which causes eutrophication and acidification of sensitive soils and fresh waters.
- Changes in land management linked to intensive agriculture have been associated with the damage to Sites of Special Scientific Interest and declines in some farmland bird populations.
- There is evidence that rivers have become more responsive to rainfall during the last 30 years due to deforestation, loss of pastureland and changes in soil management.

Version 2a – July 2002