

No Net Farm Loss – Building farm diversity and resilience into the National Food Strategy

A submission from Sustain to the National Food Strategy call for evidence

There are far-reaching social, economic and environmental benefits of a resilient and diverse farm sector. A range of farm sizes and types is vital to ensure a thriving, resilient farming industry, attractive to new entrants, supporting a healthy countryside and diverse food chains. Over the last few decades, due to a range of factors, the number of farms in England has declined dramatically: a fifth (21.3%) of the farms were lost between 2005 and 2015, and 5000 holdings were lost between 2012 and 2017.¹ Action is needed in the whole food system – not just in farm policy - to reduce further loss of diversity of scale and type of farms in England.

When this diversity is lost, precious national assets can also be lost.² This includes farming jobs, skills³ and livelihoods; opportunities for new entrants; local food hubs, vibrant rural economies and communities; valued landscapes and features, beautiful tourist destinations; and the opportunity to use farmer-led ‘whole farm’ approaches that deliver benefits for soil, wildlife and pollinators, water, carbon and the environment. A drift towards fewer larger farms, uniformity and higher intensity, where the main gain is around productivity has been shown to be short term, with loss of environmental quality, nature (see latest State of Nature report⁴) as well as businesses, livelihoods and jobs.

All sizes of farm deliver benefits and it is important to have a range of farm sizes nationally but studies have identified the benefits of diversity in farm sizes and what could be lost if smaller farms continue to decline:

- Surveying by the University of Exeter suggests that smaller farms employ more labour per unit of area.⁵ Another study of 69 farms below 20 hectares by Coventry University showed employment at 3.2 full time equivalents (FTE) per hectare compared to UK average of 0.026 FTE per hectare.⁶
- Productivity per hectare can be high on the smallest farms.⁷ UK small farms have been shown to be twice as productive as larger ones⁸ and tend to produce higher value products than larger, commodity oriented, farms.⁹
- A report by CPRE¹⁰ identifies several ways in which lost farm diversity means an impoverishment of the production and supply of food sold locally as well as regionally.
- The loss of access for new entrants and progression in farming, through the decrease in farm numbers, was recognised in the Coalition Government’s Future of Farming report in 2013.¹¹
- There is anecdotal evidence that farmers often play a vital role in rural communities, for instance in contributing to parish councils or using equipment to help with emergencies such as extreme weather.
- There is a correlation between a less varied countryside, impact on wildlife and loss of farm diversity. Simplification and specialisation grows as farms become larger and more complex businesses leading to lost features and habitats.¹² Research also shows the smallest farms (below 20ha) hold the highest concentration of parcels of deciduous woodland, semi-natural vegetation and extensive grass.¹³

The NFS goal would be to help reverse the trend in farm numbers and amalgamation of farms so annually there is no net loss. The right food, farm, business and rural policies, support and investment could lead to a flourishing of innovation through more small and medium farm businesses alongside larger farms. With it

you would see a regeneration of rural economies i.e. more livelihoods and jobs; landscape features and habitats; rural cohesion and services; supplies to fit regional and local food markets including local public procurement for schools and hospitals; and provide a ladder of progression for new entrants and new enterprise into farming.

To succeed, the NFS should complement new agriculture support policy by recommending:

1. **Directed research and development** - Invest in supply chain innovation for smaller and medium-sized farm businesses to improve market access so they can remain commercially viable. The EU funded Innovative Short Food Supply Chain management study showed the many opportunities and barriers as well as successful case studies.¹⁴
2. **Infrastructure support** – alongside other measures to ensure fairer supply chains and market rewards (as well as public rewards for public goods), we need new public and private investment in the infrastructure needed to rebuild local and regional food systems and hubs – drying and milling, storage, abattoirs, cutting rooms, small scale processing and manufacture and so on. This would allow farmers to feed their products into more appropriate scale supply chains and have more control over prices and treatment. The current centralised distribution systems favour large scale and uniform product streams from larger scale operations and monocultures. A good example is the closure of small abattoirs for a variety of reasons (in last 10 years a third of the UK's small, local abattoirs have closed) which has exacerbated problems for livestock farmers.¹⁵
3. **Concentrating investment** - Provide accessible and well-advertised capital grants, low/no interest loans or loan guarantees targeted to smaller and medium-sized farm business to deliver specific tools to maintain or boost sectors seen as needing aid or priority such as peri-urban horticulture, small scale agro-ecological farming. There is a strong case that the proposed new UK Shared Prosperity Fund (collating previous EU regional funding) could support this. The RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission National propose a publicly funded and farm focussed Agroecology Development Bank (NADB) to accelerate the transition to agro-ecological farming.
4. **Delivering training, mentoring and advice** - delivery of affordable training, independent advisory services and farmer-to-farmer mentoring to provide a coherent joined-up service accessible to smaller and medium-sized farms especially in how to collaborate and cooperate to serve regional and local markets (including public procurement) and business planning maximise returns from the market and public by providing public goods. The cost of 1:1 business support by Princes Countryside Fund is around £1500 per farm so to deliver similar support with additional market and environmental advice (£2k) for, say, all UK farms under 50 hectares (144000 farms) would cost around £288million.
5. **Review issues of access to land** - Review English issues including land prices, new models for tenancy, security of tenure, planning issues and stop the loss of county farm estates. A body in Scotland (<https://landcommission.gov.scot/about-us/>) with this remit cost under £1million to operate and delivers significant insight and output.

To further discuss the proposals in this submission, please contact Vicki Hird vicki@sustainweb.org

List of references and links to supporting evidence

¹ Defra Agriculture in the UK 2018 Datasets

² see evidence in Winter, M. and Lobley M. 2016 Is there a future for the small family farm in the UK? University of Exeter Report to the Prince's Countryside Fund, June 2016 www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/downloads/research/is-there-a-future-for-the-small-family-farm-in-the-uk-report.pdf and CPRE reports '*Uncertain harvest: does the loss of farms matter?*' and '*New Model Farming*'

³ As smaller farms employ more labour per unit of area. Winter, M. and Lobley M 2016 (Table 3.1) page 37

⁴ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/state-of-nature-2019-uks-wildlife-loss-continues-unabated>

⁵ Winter, M. and Lobley M (2016), p54.

⁶ Laughton, R, *A Matter of Scale* – a study of the productivity, financial viability and multifunctional benefits of small farms (20 ha and less), 2017. Landworkers' Alliance and Centre for Agroecology, Coventry University

⁷ Laughton, R, *A Matter of Scale* (2017)

2017. Landworkers' Alliance and Centre for Agroecology, Coventry University

⁸ Eurostat *Statistics in Focus*, 18/2011. Brussels: European Commission. 2011

⁹ CPRE. *Uncertain Harvest: does the loss of farms matter?*, 2017, p14

¹⁰ CPRE, 2017 *Uncertain Harvest: does the loss of farms matter?*

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-farming-review-2013-report>

¹² 'Postwar changes in arable farming and biodiversity in Great Britain', Journal of Applied Ecology Issue 1, pp157-176, February

2002, Landscape diversity section <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1046/j.1365-2664.2002.00695.x/full>

¹³ Lobley, M. (1997, 2000) cited in Winter, M. and Lobley, M. 2016, pp 49-51

¹⁴ Innovative Short Food Supply Chain management, EIP-AGRI Focus Group 2015 https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/sites/agri-eip/files/eip-agri_fg_innovative_food_supply_chain_management_final_report_2015_en.pdf

¹⁵ see <https://www.localabattoirs.com/> and <http://sustainablefoodtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Health-and-Harmony-Response-abattoirs.pdf>