



The Future of Scottish Agriculture: a discussion document from the Scottish Government (2015).

Plantlife Scotland's contribution to the discussion.

Summary:

We believe that a vision for Scotland's agriculture needs to work with the grain of nature, providing a structure and system to deliver social and environmental benefits for all, as well as the economic benefits for Scotland's rural communities. The key points are:

1. A biodiverse landscape is a necessity; not a luxury. Despite significant advances in halting acute and chronic pollution, we have failed to address the fragmentation of habitats in which biodiversity can function fully, providing the ecosystem services we rely on. We need to be working at a landscape scale, supported by longer term agri-environment schemes and an effective advisory service.
2. A change in paradigm is needed in which intensively managed land also provides niches and connections for a wide range of plants and pollinators to survive, thus maintaining crucial ecosystem services and creating more wild plant-friendly agricultural systems.
3. Targeted agri-environment schemes can increase ecosystem resilience, which may or may not have an economic dimension for land managers, but which are valued by society. This will require a new social contract with land managers where public goods are seen to be as valuable as private profits.

Discussion:

Plantlife welcomes the Scottish Government publication on the vision for Scotland's agriculture. With the recent changes in Common Agricultural Policy and the mismatch between biodiversity targets and resources available to tackle those targets, a strategic vision of the agriculture sector in Scotland and its custodianship of Scotland's land is very timely and could pave the way for significant steps forward.

While the vision expressed by the Scottish Government here is welcome, there are missing details which would make it more compelling and easier to deploy. The emphasis on profitability, while understandable, must be aligned with sustainability from an

environmental as well as a business perspective. The farmed environment, as the major use of land in Scotland and despite the introduction of agri-environment schemes, is still struggling to support the range and abundance of wildlife species that drive our ecosystem services. Yet, long term profits can only be sustained where environmental stewardship is central to farm business models.

The intention for Scotland to be a world leader in green farming is very welcome. However it would be useful to define what 'green' means in this context. It should mean environmentally sustainable in terms of biodiversity, which delivers long term environmental health, as well as having a low carbon footprint and with multiple benefits delivered back to local communities. All three aspects are required.

Plantlife's vision is for Scotland's agriculture sector to achieve long term sustainable businesses founded on sustainable land use management that bequeaths a better environment to future generations: one where the ongoing loss of biodiversity has been halted; where ecosystems function effectively with no need to support biodiversity through planting pollen/nectar seed mixes; and where soil biodiversity is maintained and conserved year on year. We suggest that the Scottish Government may usefully explore the opportunities afforded by the Scottish Land Use Strategy and CAP reform to create more wild plant-friendly agricultural systems, thereby bolstering populations of wild pollinators too.

This would require a nationwide recovery plan at the centre of agricultural policy making; placing social and economic benefits within the carrying capacity of the environment. In essence this means that we need to see better value for biodiversity coming from the investment that the public purse is making through agri-environment schemes. There have been significant advances in halting acute and chronic pollution of the environment, especially in freshwater systems, but we as a society have failed to address the fragmentation and isolation of terrestrial habitats in which biodiversity functions fully, providing the ecosystem services that we rely on.

Scotland's farmland deserves better than the current trajectory of declining diversity and increasing homogenisation of habitats. So much more could be achieved through better deployment of existing resources. A change of paradigm is required in which intensively managed land also provides niches for a wide range of plants and pollinators to survive, which in turn maintain the ecosystem services that we use.

As our contribution to the discussion on the Future of Scottish Agriculture, our main comments which we would encourage the Scottish government to consider are:

1. **Higher levels of investment:** Scotland has the lowest level of Rural Development support per hectare of farmed land in the EU. Direct funds are the fourth lowest. Biodiversity-rich nations, like Scotland, must invest in maintaining and restoring that biodiversity through targeted agri-environment schemes and other appropriate funding mechanisms and must not continue to be content to see the decline in biodiversity continue.
2. **An outcome-based delivery focused on buying environmental goods:** SRDP needs to continue to move towards an outcome-based delivery that focuses on biodiversity results and has less reliance on unfocused and unmeasurable incentives. Some measures need to be less prescriptive and more flexible and this is especially important for High Nature Value Farming. The successor to the Lesser Favoured Area Support scheme, the Areas of Natural Constraint scheme, needs to deliver more public benefits. It now seems clear that the current approach of 'payment for profits foregone' is insufficient to incentivise managers to do the right thing. We need a new social contract in which there are tangible and measurable gains for wildlife for receipt of public funds.
3. **Improved targeting of measures:** we welcome recent and ongoing attempts to target SRDP measures. By targeting schemes geographically, measures can be put in place to manage for the species and habitats that occur in that geographical area.
4. **Specific, targeted and appropriate advice to individual farms:** the availability of professional advice for farmers wanting to access agri-environment scheme funding in Scotland has dwindled with the closure of FWAG Scotland, Scottish Native Woodlands and the decline in capacity at SRUC, Scotland's Rural College. We welcome the recent tender for a new advisory service. It is imperative that management advice is available across Scotland and it not tied to any one specific theme such as Designated Sites. In addition, the advisory service needs to incorporate an option to call in specialist support, to provide generic advice on maximising benefits for biodiversity, plus a level of detail appropriate to the site and its environmental importance.

5. **An accessible process that enables farmers to access support:** recent SRDP bureaucracy has put many land managers off applying for support. The problem is particularly acute in High Nature Value areas, including crofting land, where SRDP is generally felt to be out of the means of crofters. This excludes 0.75 million hectares of land managed by around 30% of households on the mainland and 65% of households on the islands. We hope that the recent changes to the SRDP schemes will reverse this trend so we see more small scale, crofting land owners gaining form SRDP schemes.
 6. **Effective monitoring:** Monitoring of SRDP outcomes has, to date, been limited and as a result has not been able to measure the value for money gained through schemes. Monitoring must focus on whether the funding spent achieved any positive environmental outcome. Taxpayers need to know if the support provided resulted in more orchids, not whether the farmer actually spent the funding or not.
 7. **Access to support on a longer-term basis and on a wider landscape scale:** five-year agreements are too short for effective land management and it is counter-productive for good schemes, or groups of schemes, to disappear after five years. For effective *and* cost effective management, ten-year agreements need to be available, paralleling current woodland management schemes, or advisors need to be in place to help land managers re-apply. Working on a landscape scale is difficult, but with the right facilitation can be made to work.
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Specific comments in response to the Outcomes that support the Vision statement in the Future of Scottish Agriculture Discussion Document:

Outcome 1. We agree with using resources efficiently, and give full support to maintaining and developing the social and environmental benefits derived from farming in remote and fragile areas - High Nature Value farming works with the grain of nature.

Outcome 2. 'Green credentials' - what are the component parts of green farming that make it more than merely branding? For farmers to display green credentials there needs to be some objective targets or actions which farmers can measure themselves against.

Outcome 3. It is sensible to build resilience to unforeseen events. There is a large gap in this outcome in that there is no mention of environmental resilience in 'Next Steps' -it's all supply-chain related. We would expect responsible governance to emphasise that environmental resilience a key component of green farming.

Outcome 4. Education and skills training is essential, and to be sustainable in the long term it has to include understanding ecological processes. Agricultural colleges have traditionally focused on production-oriented learning, but this is now not enough for future land managers to farm sustainably. The farming sector needs a Farm Advisory service that has the capacity to help farmers with both specific biodiversity issues and with ecological network thinking, in order to deliver the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and sustainable profits.

Outcome 5. We suggest that research needs to be broad in scope to encompass not just technical solutions to productivity but also research that looks at working with natural processes. There is a gap in research into the role of wild plants in maintaining ecosystem services and in providing a natural supplement to animal nutrition.

Outcome 6. Green Farming - The vision of this section is essential in delivering a sustainable agricultural sector. The ideas in this section of the Discussion need to be a green thread that runs through the other Outcomes. Unfortunately this does not seem to be picked up in the other Outcomes, with the exception of green credentials mentioned in Outcome 2.

As we stated above it would be helpful to have a clearer definition of green farming as currently it can mean different things to different people. It has to say what it doesn't do as well as what it should do - covering the range of criteria that actually makes farming 'green' in ways which farmers can understand. Green farming can be much more than merely minimising negative impacts on flora and fauna.

Outcome 7. Since much of our wildlife, and especially the wild plants, is dependent on sensitive management of the land, we support the development of career paths that assist new and existing farmers to help maintain a healthy environment.

Outcome 8. Contribution to Society - It is here that there is a need for more analysis of public benefit arising from agricultural practices, beyond the social fabric role. Agriculture

does not provide services such as outdoor recreation, it provides the cultural landscape in which outdoor recreation happens (including botany, ornithology and the rest). That landscape comprises habitats made up of a range of species interacting with each other and with agricultural practices.

Species diversity and habitat connectivity increase the depth and width of the landscape and wildlife experience. This is the public benefit that agri-environment schemes address, but this provides little income or incentive to farmers, which are assessed merely on profits forgone for implementing measures. Targeted agri-environment options can also increase resilience of other ecosystem services, which may or may not have an economic dimension to individual landholders, but are valued by our society.

This is why there is a need to develop a new social contract with managers of the land through both CAP Pillar funding streams- to maintain the wildlife and the landscape as public goods supported by public funds, as well as for food and drink, and create value in so doing.

It is here that the Discussion could profitably focus on aligning the Scottish Land Use Strategy and associated spatial planning strategies and frameworks with how the CAP is delivered.

Outcome 9. We support the aim of the Scottish Government to have greater influence on the development of EU agricultural policy for the benefit of Scotland's wild plants.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Scottish Government on making the Scottish agriculture sector fit for the 21st century: a sustainable sector in the full sense of the word, which benefits future generations as well as today's.

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