Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

Environment charities warn on need to act, not just plan, in changes to Sustainable Farming Scheme plans

For immediate release

After several months engaging with the Welsh Government's stakeholder groups on the final design of the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS), Wales Environment Link (WEL) members are warning that today's announcement falls short on what it'll take to modernise farming support in time to tackle the growing climate and nature crises. It will be deeds, not words; actions not just plans, that bring nature back.

The decision from the Cabinet Secretary announced today scales back the initial intended approach to reward farmers for making their land more resilient for climate, nature and sustainable food production with an expectation that 10% of the land of all farms receiving subsidy – a 4% increase on the average 6% cover – includes tree cover. The revised Scheme Outline will remove that Scheme Rule and instead require all farms receiving subsidy to create a "tree planting and hedgerow creation opportunity plan' and to "demonstrate some progress towards implementing the plan by the end of the 2030 Scheme year".

The decision to still retain the 10% habitats rule is very welcome, as is the commitment to a scheme-wide tree cover target (i.e. including the optional and collaborative tiers) and a planned governance mechanism to ensure delivery of the target. It is crucial that the farming sector contributes to nature and net zero targets; tree planting plans will be paid for with public money, so we must get value from that by ensuring that the requirement to "demonstrate progress" by 2030 is better defined, so that 'progress' does not just amount to one more tree. We welcome the Welsh Government's commitment to sustainability and to working with all to ensure uptake, but we must get good value for money on the efforts, funds and advice that will go into those plans.

"We recognise the pressure farmers face and the need to ensure that sustainable farming is economically viable," said Karen Whitfield, Director of Wales Environment

Link. “However, the scale and pace of the proposed changes under the SFS do not reflect the urgency required to address the climate and biodiversity crises. A requirement simply to ‘have a tree planting plan’ and ‘some progress’ on its implementation is not enough; it can be seen as a first step, and we look forward to working with Welsh Government on ensuring the plans’ application and governance is robust. We need to see real, impactful action, with substantive plans with all tree planting completed by 2035. Tree planting, hedgerow restoration and habitat management should be at the heart of the SFS: they offer multiple benefits, from carbon sequestration, to soil recovery to farm resilience against extreme weather events like flooding”.

The UK Government’s 2021 Food Security Report rightly highlights climate change, climate variability and biodiversity loss as the biggest risks to UK domestic food production, alongside other environmental declines, like soil degradation and water quality. By ignoring this, we ignore the changes we must make for future generations. Unfortunately, it is predominantly unsustainable agricultural practice shaped by poor policy that has led to this loss; it’s only by modernizing and helping farming with a just transition to sustainable land management that we can reverse it.

Ensuring the SFS Delivers for Nature, Farmers, and the Taxpayer

WEL also urges the Welsh Government to avoid the mistakes seen in England’s Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS), which has been criticized for paying for plans that do not result in tangible environmental benefits. As the National Audit Office report set out: “Payments for developing plans are not dependent on actions resulting from these plans, meaning the plans are not expected to generate any direct environmental benefits”.

Furthermore, the SFS must ensure that taxpayers’ money does not result in further damage to nature. A quarter of the funding applied for (£74m) was used on establishing and maintaining herbal leys (i.e. temporary grasslands), which in some instances has led to unintended negative consequences for nature (by incentivising removal of good quality, long-term grassland), with 30 organisations highlighting this in an open letter. This is extremely poor value for money, and risks delivering poor environmental outcomes if herbal leys are put in inappropriate contexts and fail to establish.

Next steps

Looking ahead, WEL is committed to working constructively with the Welsh Government, farmers, and other stakeholders to ensure that the SFS delivers real value for money, with a clear focus on actions that drive positive outcomes for nature, the climate, and sustainable food production. This includes supporting the 10% habitat Scheme Rule and ensuring that real outcomes for nature are prioritised; developing ambitious upper tiers that can deliver more for nature; and governance for implementing the tree-planting plans.

“We all want the same thing—a sustainable, resilient farming sector that thrives with nature and can withstand environmental and economic shocks,” said Arfon Williams, co-chair of WEL’s Land Use Policy Group. “We need the Welsh Government to place sufficient funding into actions that deliver the most for climate, nature, and sustainable food production. However, the lack of a plan detailing the contribution the scheme needs to make to hit biodiversity targets, plus there being no obvious means of helping agriculture to mitigate its impact on the climate, must be urgently addressed. A failure to do so would bring into question the scheme’s credibility as an effective means of using public money to tackle these mounting challenges”.

“Welsh Government has clearly listened to and acted on the concerns raised by many farmers” said Andrew Tuddenham, co-chair of WEL’s Land Use Policy Group. “If farming is to withstand the intensifying environmental and production challenges that it faces it’s critical that the scheme is taken up by as many farmers as possible. But the success of the scheme rests on whether it can help maintain and speed up the growth of nature-friendly farming in Wales. This requires Welsh Government to commit to properly fund and monitor the scheme and to scale up its farm advice to help turn farm plans into meaningful actions and benefits.”

Nature cannot wait for action tomorrow; it must not be the lowest priority when it’s fundamental to functioning ecosystems, food production and resilient business models.

Additional quote from a WEL member

Rachel Sharp, director of Wildlife Trusts Wales, adds: "The Sustainable Farming Scheme needs to do more for climate and nature to ensure the long-term

sustainability of farm businesses. By relegating most nature-positive actions to the 'optional' tier of the Sustainable Farming Scheme, Welsh Government is making nature recovery in Wales much harder. We recognise the commitment of farmers in the scheme to manage existing habitat but the future of farming needs more nature, especially to cope with extreme weather. Farmers must be supported to create new ponds, more woodland, and hedgerows. Welsh Government must rectify this by increasing investment into the optional and collaborative tiers of the scheme to revive the ambition that has been lost."

Notes to editors

1. Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environment NGOs which works together on the vision of a thriving environment for future generations. Our full list of current members is available on our website: https://waleslink.org/our-members/

2. WEL has been represented on the Welsh Government's Ministerial Roundtable, Officials Group and Carbon Panel for the last 5 months.

3. Our previous response to the Sustainable Farming Scheme consultation is available here: https://waleslink.org/sustainable-farming-scheme/

4. Further information on the SFS's need to deliver for nature is here: https://waleslink.org/sustainable-farming-scheme-briefings/