

Nature-friendly farming

Securing a food and nature rich future



Summary

- Nature and farming are both under pressure, but nature-friendly farming gives us a clear path to support both.
- Farming practices have undergone significant changes since the 1940s. Government policies incentivised production, but at a cost. Wildlife has declined, soils have been damaged, rivers and lakes became polluted, damaging the natural systems farming relies on. This has left many farms more vulnerable to the impacts of stresses like extreme weather, pests and disease, and market volatility.
- But there is still hope. Some kinds of farming remain of high value for nature, especially in upland areas and offshore islands. Meanwhile, many farmers are leading the way in adopting regenerative, climate and nature-friendly practices - repairing soils, restoring lost habitats and creating farms that cope better with floods, drought and other climate pressures.
- To help nature recover, we need more farms to follow in these footsteps - restoring soils and creating a diversity of habitats that provide food and shelter for wildlife throughout the year.
- When farming works with nature, everyone benefits. Yields can increase, input costs can fall, and farms can become more financially sustainable in the long-term.
- To make this possible at scale across the UK, we need well-funded nature-friendly farming schemes, trusted advice and fairer supply chains. We must also reduce food waste and avoid simply shifting our environmental impact to other countries.



Great Yellow Bumblebee on Red Clover



Image by Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Nature-friendly farming can support the recovery of rare species like the Turtle Dove.

Introduction

Around 70% of UK land is farmed, so the way we farm has a huge impact on wildlife, the climate and the health of our soils, water and air. For generations, farming has shaped our landscapes and created some of our most nature-rich habitats from hay meadows and networks of ponds to hedgerows and wood pasture.

Since the 1940s, farming has transformed in response to government policies, market pressures, bigger machinery and new fertilisers and pesticides, which helped produce more food to feed a growing population. While this drive for productivity succeeded in boosting yields, it also reshaped the countryside, inadvertently degrading soils, polluting water and removing vital resources for wildlife, ultimately undermining the resilience of farming itself.

Meadows and heathlands were ploughed up. Hedgerows and woodlands were removed. Peat bogs and ponds were drained. Large areas of these habitats disappeared, removing the food and shelter that wildlife relies on.

And it's not just wildlife affected. This loss has made farming harder too. There are fewer pollinators and insects to help control

pests. Soils have lost life and structure. Even much-loved birds like Curlews and Turtle Doves have started to disappear.

But there are still places where nature is holding on. In the uplands and on islands, less intensive farming has helped to preserve more natural systems. Elsewhere, more farmers are restoring habitats and putting nature back where it's been lost, though we still have a long way to go to reverse the decline.

Farmers face their own challenges too. Rising costs, extreme weather, market pressures and policy uncertainty have all made it even more difficult to run a profitable farm.

However, there is a clear way forward. When farms work with nature, the land becomes healthier, wildlife returns, farm resilience increases, and food production becomes more secure for the future.

A new wave of farming

There is a quiet revolution in the fields and hills across the UK. More farmers are seeking to build profitable and productive businesses by embracing regenerative and agroecological principles that repair soils, boosts pollinators and improves natural pest control; all of which help adapt to climate change and improve the quality and slow the flow of water. And this movement is growing.

Farmer-led groups like the Nature Friendly Farming Network and Pasture for Life bring people together to share what they have learned. Events like the Oxford Real Farming Conference, The Wales Real Food and Farming Conference, Fields Good, GO Falkland and Groundswell give farmers the chance to exchange ideas, and show that a different way of farming is not only possible, but already happening.

Big businesses are taking notice too. Lloyds Banking Group, Co-op, Tesco and Lidl have contributed to the Soil Association Exchange Market, driving funds towards helping UK farmers move towards more sustainable ways of farming. Marks and Spencer's aims to source 100% of its British produce from

regenerative farms; and Tesco has supported more than 300 farmers and land managers in East Anglia through an RSPB advisory partnership.

These steps all make a difference. They can improve water and soil, support healthier diets, and help farms adapt to a changing climate. Research also shows that these regenerative practices can boost yields and underpin more profitable farm businesses. Regenerative farming principles include protecting and enhancing the soil and soil organic matter, giving pastures longer rest periods and reducing or stopping the use of pesticides, parasiticides and inorganic fertilisers.

But this is only part of the picture.

Nature needs farmers to build on these vital regenerative principles – improving how farmed ecosystems function and creating the right habitats to provide wildlife with the resources they need all year round.



Wildflower margins are a vital habitat for a diverse range of insect life.



Image by Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Male Cirl Bunting

Nature-friendly farming

Nature needs a diversity of habitats, providing sufficient year-round resources of food, shelter and safe places to breed and rest. Whether arable, dairy, upland or lowland grazing and horticulture, all different farm types can provide enough year-round resources for nature in their own particular way.

Some farming landscapes - often in the uplands and offshore islands - still have large areas of semi-natural habitat because climate, geology, topography, soils and distance from markets have constrained agriculture. This has limited what can be grown or reared, and as such, lower intensity livestock farming and very small amounts of cropping have dominated these landscapes.

In Scotland, this kind of farming is often associated with crofting – a distinctive kind of agricultural system. These farming and crofting systems are referred to as high nature value and can provide a wide range of ecosystem services, contributing to the sense of place and local economy through flood alleviation, tourism, and carbon storage.

The best way to enable nature to thrive in these landscapes is to maintain low intensity farming, with no or very low inputs of fertiliser and pesticides, and sensitive grazing of the right mix of livestock. This approach helps keep habitats in good health and safeguards some of the UK's most vulnerable species such as Curlew and Marsh Fritillary butterfly. And in these challenging landscapes, it is also proven to be the best route to profitability and business resilience.

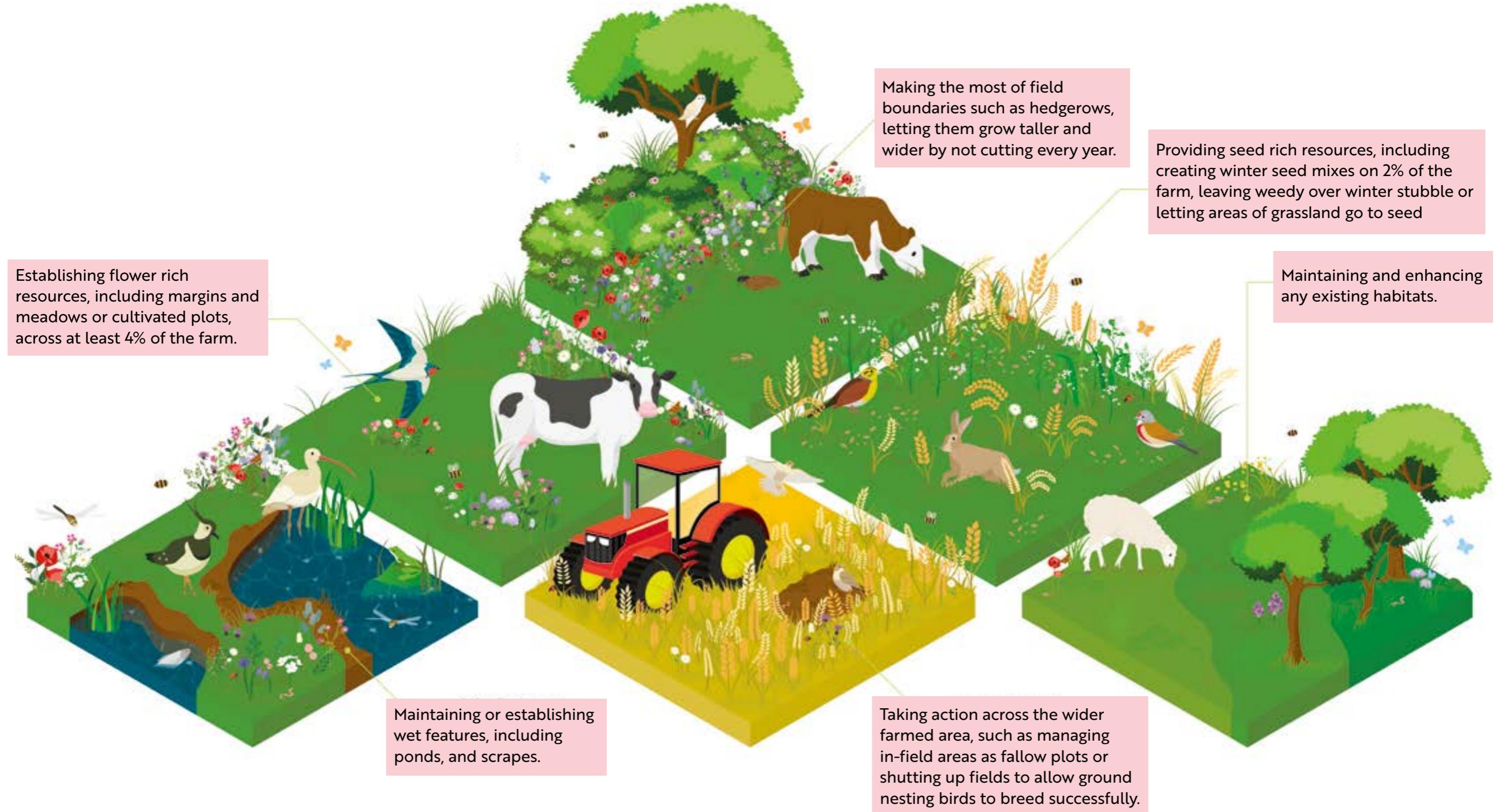
In the landscapes with the most fertile soils, and most favourable climate, often in the UK lowlands, farms are dominated by

cropped land or improved grasslands. In these landscapes, only small pockets of semi-natural habitat persist - often in the form of hedgerows, ditches and small areas of unimproved grassland. For farms within these landscapes, there are six key actions that provide the vital ingredients for wildlife to thrive on farms. Managing 10% of a farm to provide a mix of these habitats is proven to recover wildlife.

Some species need more specific help. Turtle Doves need a combination of early seeding flowering habitat, scrub and accessible water, to enable them to breed successfully when they arrive in spring. Cirl Buntings, on the other hand, are very reliant on seed rich habitat over winter and the best habitat to provide this is weedy overwinter barley stubbles, in combination with hedges and low input pastures. Corncrakes use long vegetation as cover for breeding from spring to late summer, so they need areas where grazing can be removed and cutting delayed to allow for safe nesting places.

High Nature Value farmland can be managed specifically for particular species and, elsewhere, the six key actions can be tailored to provide the best support for species with certain requirements. Where farmers have taken RSPB advice to tailor their management to support these rarer species, we have seen incredible stories of farmland nature bouncing back.

Six key actions for Nature-friendly farming



Case study: peatland restoration, Blaen Y Coed

Since 2017, the Ritchie family has worked with RSPB Cymru and National Trust Cymru as part of a pioneering collaboration, working to restore peatlands in the Upper Conwy Valley, part-funded through Wales Peatland Sustainable Management Scheme, run by Snowdonia National Park Authority.

The Ritchie family are National Trust tenants at Blaen Y Coed, an upland farm in the Ysbyty Ifan estate. Moorland on this estate falls within the Migneint Special Area of Conservation: a large and internationally renowned expanse of upland heath and blanket bog, with huge potential for delivering public good, such as carbon storage, biodiversity, water filtration and flood protection – when in well-managed and healthy condition.

The partnership has been restoring areas of damaged peatland, with the goal of creating healthier habitat for declining birds. The work includes blocking drainage ditches and deep erosion gulleys in the peatlands; creating mini peat dams which in turn allows small pools to form and rewet the landscape. Most of the work in the very challenging wet peat-bog habitat was carried out by the Ritchie family themselves, using their own farm machinery.

Close monitoring of the habitat has shown it has improved dramatically since the work has been done. Pools are re-forming and specialist bog plants such as sphagnum mosses, cotton grasses and sundews are

thriving once again. Wet peatland is an ideal habitat for Golden Plover and Curlew and over the summer of 2021, both species returned to the site to breed successfully within the re-wetted habitats with chicks of both species being seen. This proved to be the first successful breeding on this site since the 1990s. Curlew have been seen on site every year since their return in 2021. This project continues, and more re-wetting works are planned during the winter of 2025.



Case study: arable farming in Knapwell, Cambridgeshire

In 2000, the RSPB purchased Hope Farm, a 181ha arable farm in south Cambridgeshire, with the aim of testing whether farmers can run a viable business while helping wildlife.

Farmland birds have increased nearly three-fold since the baseline set in 2000. Winter populations have increased even more sharply, nearly 15 times higher, after the RSPB introduced measures to make sure there are year-round resources for nature. Butterfly populations are also increasing, already four times higher in 2019 than the 2000 baseline.

The profitability of the farm has been maintained by taking the least productive

areas out of production to create wildlife habitats and generating income from agri-environment schemes. One trial showed that creation of in-field flower strips resulted in no net loss of yield because of enhanced pest control on the remaining cropped area. Hope Farm also stopped using insecticide in 2018 and saw no significant increases in crop losses from insect pests, compared to previous years.



Case study: County Down Farmland Bird Initiative

In 2021, an Environmental Farming Scheme group project, the County Down Farmland Bird Initiative (CDFBI), was established to support farmers in agri-environment schemes - with Yellowhammer, Linnet, Tree Sparrow, Reed Bunting, Skylark, Lapwing, Barn Owl and Kestrel as the priority species. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) funds the project, with RSPB NI acting as facilitators. The number of farmers in the group is 33. Within the group, farmers receive ongoing support, training and advice from an RSPB facilitator to ensure they feel fully equipped and inspired to deliver targeted conservation advice.

Farmland birds have increased nearly three-fold since the baseline set in 2000. Farmland bird surveys are carried out between April and June each year by a dedicated team of staff and volunteers, monitoring the number of priority species breeding on farms within the CDFBI project.

These surveys help generate tailored conservation advice for farmers and landowners to enhance, create and manage suitable habitats for these species on their farm. This season, the team spent around 700 hours in the field surveying - a huge team effort which allowed us to spread our survey efforts geographically, maximising the number of farms we can engage with.

Baseline survey results indicate that in East Co Down, Yellowhammer populations are seeing localised recoveries on farmland where we are giving one-to-one advice, for example, provision of seed-rich habitat overwinter, access to suitable nesting habitat and establishment of insect-rich habitat.



This year, numbers remained stable overall at a total of 85 Yellowhammer pairs, with the highest count reaching 15 pairs on a single farm. Linnet had another positive season with a total of 108 pairs recorded. The species continues to expand into new areas, making good use of farms with rough ground and seed-rich habitats.



Case study: Strathspey Wetlands and Waders Initiative

The Strathspey Wetlands & Wader Initiative was launched in 2009 as a partnership between NatureScot, RSPB, Cairngorms National Park Authority, SAC Consulting and several independent agents. The project is working with farmers and crofters across 10,000 hectares to improve farmed habitats for the area's important populations of Lapwing, Snipe, Curlew, Oystercatcher and Redshank.

Strathspey remains one of the top priority areas on mainland Scotland, despite recent declines. This is thanks to the farming systems within the landscape and a strong partnership with the local farmers and crofters. Management and advice on individual farms have been guided by a comprehensive survey of breeding waders carried out every five years on over 100 farms, the latest of which was undertaken in



2025. The results from the 2025 survey will be used to further improve targeting and advice in future years.

The Initiative works with the farmers, crofters, land managers and volunteers across the landscape to create and enhance a variety of habitats including wetlands, peatlands, species-rich and wet grasslands. Funding for this management has been provided through Scottish Government's agri-environment and climate scheme to over 60 farms alongside project funding secured by Cairngorms National Park and RSPB. We know from comparisons of previous surveys that targeted management at a large scale has helped maintain populations on the farms we have worked with in comparison to declines in the wider populations.

Whether a farm is defined as High Nature Value or a high yielding mixed enterprise, all farms have habitats and thus potential to help deliver a nature-positive landscape. It is crucial that we support these farms through payments for the public goods they deliver - nature, carbon, water management, pollination and pest control - so they deliver as much benefit as possible for nature, climate and farming.



The benefits of nature-friendly farming

Nature-friendly farming helps rebuild the natural systems that food production relies on. Currently, the UK is one of the most nature depleted countries in the world. The loss of nature and vital ecosystem function including healthy soils, clean water, pollination and pest control threatens our economy and food security.

We need to bring food consumption, production and space for nature back into balance in a way which will make our landscapes and our food system resilient going forward, underpinning our food security. Nature-friendly farming sits at the heart of this approach.



Increased business resilience

Adopting more nature and climate-friendly farming practices enables farms to become less reliant on costly artificial inputs like fertilisers and pesticides, as nature steps in to provide these services instead. A recent study of 165 farms found that nature-friendly farming can raise profits by as much as 45%, depending on the type of farm.⁽ⁱ⁾



Wellbeing boost

Many farmers say that nature-friendly practices deliver better business and wellbeing outcomes for themselves and their communities.



Resilience to climate change impacts

Increasing tree cover, with the right tree in the right place, can provide many on-farm benefits, including vital shade for livestock during hot weather and reduce soil erosion and runoff. On-farm ponds and wetlands can help boost resilience in the face of drought.

Sustaining yields

While introducing habitat can reduce the area of cropped or grazed land, many nature-friendly practices can also increase yields. As well as nature-friendly practices that boost soil fertility, a growing body of studies have shown that introducing flower rich margins and in-field strips can boost overall yields by increasing the number of pollinators and species that provide natural pest control, such as Ladybirds and Lacewings.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

Protecting GDP

Losing more of nature would put farming and the wider economy under real pressure. The Green Finance Institute warns that nature loss could reduce UK GDP by around 12% within a decade.⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ A recent UK Government review concluded the loss of nature poses the greatest threat to domestic food security, alongside climate change and the depletion of soils.^(iv)

⁽ⁱ⁾ Farming At The Sweet Spot report. NFFN & The Wildlife Trusts (2023): https://www.nffn.org.uk/assets/reports/farming-at-the-sweet-spot_1.pdf

⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ For example, see Pywell et al. (2015): <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26423846/> and Woodcock et al. (2025): <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.70079>

⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ Green Finance Institute (2024): <https://hive.greenfinanceinstitute.com/gfihive/insight/assessing-the-materiality-of-nature-related-financial-risks-for-the-uk/>

^(iv) UK Food Security Report (2021): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021>

Helping nature-friendly farming grow

Many farmers, crofters and other land managers are already actively driving a transition to nature-friendly farming, producing great food, and providing better business and wellbeing outcomes for themselves and their communities - but they can't do this alone.

Farming is hugely influenced by the broader food system. Government policies across the four UK countries, how food markets and supply chains operate, and the food choices we make all play a part.

But many parts of the food system are currently working against this transition.

For example, despite the agri-food sector currently contributing £128bn a year to the UK economy, farmers often receive less than 1% of the profits made from their produce.^(v) Nature-friendly farming does not yet receive a market premium and public subsidies for farming to date have not focused on ensuring food is produced in a nature-friendly way. Moreover, so much of the food we produce (9.52 million tonnes) is still wasted each year.^(vi)

Scaling up nature-friendly farming across the UK requires a concerted effort across the whole food system, with governments, businesses and financial institutions taking action.



Governments in all four UK nations need to support a fair and just transition to nature-friendly farming. This should include:

- Creating well-funded, effective agri-environment schemes to enable farmers to be paid to provide year-round resources for nature, supported by funded advice.
- Ensuring we use trade policy to raise standards and avoid offshoring our environmental footprint.
- Measures to address wider food system issues that act as a barrier to scaling up nature-friendly farming, including tackling unfair contracts and high levels of food waste.

Businesses and retailers need to ensure their supply chains incentivise nature-friendly farming by:

- Providing advice and support on nature-friendly practices and habitat creation, tailored to farms, including investing in farm assessments and monitoring.
- Developing and publishing a habitat action plan and clear time-bound targets, within transparent reporting frameworks.

- Disclosing the impacts of their goods and services on nature and the climate across the UK and globally.
- Implementing longer-term contracts with farmers that incentivise the transition to nature-friendly farming and enable future planning.
- Engaging their consumers on/with their nature journey to drive consumer choice.

Banks and other financial institutions

have a key role to play in de-risking the transition through new financial products that reflect the benefits of the transition, for example:

- Reflecting the benefits of nature-friendly farming in the terms and cost of lending.
- Supporting the uptake of tailored financial advice for nature-friendly practices and financing models through the transition years.
- Factoring climate and nature risks into their investment decisions and engaging companies to strengthen their environmental reporting and performance.

Everyone has a role to play – through using their voice and their choices to support a food system that works for nature and people. By joining food and farming campaigns and choosing food that backs nature-friendly farmers, we can help protect wildlife, sustain farm livelihoods, and build a resilient, fair food system for the future.

^vSustain (2022): <https://www.sustainweb.org/news/nov22-unpicking-food-prices-new/>

^{vi} House of Lords Library (2021): <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/food-waste-in-the-uk/>



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