

# Rural Development Sub-Committee

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## Further evidence from the National Trust

### Inquiry into the future of the uplands

During the Rural Development Committee evidence session of 19 November I offered to provide further information on the need for investment to deliver actions in the Environment Strategy relating to biodiversity. In addition the National Trust would like to provide further information on two issues discussed during the session: comments from the Welsh Grazier's Forum, and balancing environmental management and food production.

#### 1. Environment Strategy actions relating to biodiversity

Outcome 21 of the Strategy states that "Sites of international, Welsh and local importance are in favourable condition to support the species and habitats for which they have been identified". A sub-group of the Wales Biodiversity Partnership has been established to help deliver this outcome, led by CCW with the National Trust one of the members.

The following information is taken from CCW's database of actions required to deliver Outcome 21 and may be subject to change. Based on the latest information provided to us:

- Five upland Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and two upland SSSI's with a total of 30 actions are attributed to the National Trust. The database is still being developed and we estimate that there are a further three actions to be added to this.
- A conservative estimate is that at least seven of these actions will require Section 15 agreement to fund management to improve the site condition, usually alterations to grazing regimes. Some of these actions refer to large blocks of land where multiple agreements may be required.
- The level of funding for a Section 15 agreement varies according to the size of the site and is determined by CCW.
- A further four actions have agri-environment schemes attributed as the mechanism, but because Tir Gofal is now closed, and we are unsure of Glastir's ability to deliver these actions, a Section 15 agreement may also be required for these.
- Section 15 also funds capital projects such as ditch blocking and tackling peat erosion. These aspects are not necessarily captured on the Outcome 21 database so are additional actions requiring funding.

#### 2. Comments from the Welsh Grazier's Forum

We have considered the full comments recently made by the Forum, as quoted during the evidence session. It is our view that whilst the description of overgrown sites dominated by inedible vegetation is true of some upland areas, this is not the case for all sites. For example, at Cwm Idwal National Nature Reserve sheep have been excluded for more than 10 years in order to allow flora to recover from past pressures. There is now a thriving habitat including a good mix of heath and bog species.

Where there are problems with molinia and bracken this cannot be simply attributed to declining sheep numbers: in our experience it is the loss of cattle from the uplands which is the critical factor. A mixed grazing system which includes cattle helps to create a more diverse sward and prevent or reduce the dominance of species such as molinia. Sheep do not graze these plants so would not reduce their dominance. We have seen this clearly through the ecological monitoring system we operate on our upland farm, Hafod y Llan on the southern flank of Snowdon. With support from CCW, sheep numbers were drastically reduced on the farm and a herd of Welsh black cattle introduced. The cattle now graze the highest slopes and play a key part in the restoration of the ecology of the farm. Marked improvements can already be seen in the condition of the heaths on the mountain.

#### 3. Balancing environmental management and food production

We believe sustainable land management is the key to ensuring the uplands produce food whilst conserving and enhancing environmental services. Detail on what we mean by sustainable land management was provided in our written evidence. The Trust is developing tools such as land capability assessments to guide land management decisions. These will help us to ensure that each parcel of land is used for its optimum purpose in terms of sustainable land management.

The risk for the future is that market forces will drive upland farms into food production which damages environmental goods and services such as soil and water. In the absence of market rewards for farmers to provide environmental goods and services, society relies on regulation and public subsidy to ensure their provision. It is therefore essential that mechanisms such as cross compliance are rigorously enforced as they provide a safeguard against environmental damage from food production. There is also a need for agri-environment schemes to offer a viable alternative to the option of deriving income from intensive food production.

By providing a package of tools and safeguards - regulation, advice, grants - based on sustainable land management principles the Government can ensure that Welsh upland farms achieve a sustainable balance between food production and environmental management.

I hope this information is useful and look forward to the results of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

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