

P-06-1388 Remove the requirement for farmers to have at least 10% tree cover to access the new Sustainable Farming Scheme

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 29 Ionawr 2024
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Petition title: Remove the requirement for farmers to have at least 10% tree cover to access the new Sustainable Farming Scheme

Text of petition: Welsh Government is designing a new scheme to support farmers called the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). The most controversial Universal Action needed to join the scheme is the requirement for a farmer to have 10% tree cover, excluding hedgerows, plus 10% habitat. Many farmers for various reasons cannot plant 10% of their land with trees. The percentage of tree cover required to enter the scheme should be lowered to an attainable level to allow as many farmers as possible to be able to join.

More details

Reducing the area of productive farming land will decrease food production. This will affect all industries that serve the agricultural sector.

A low level of uptake of the scheme will be economically detrimental to the rural economy of Wales. Many farmers who presently receive BPS and cannot receive SFS will struggle to survive.

The increased levels of tree cover could be included in the Optional Actions (OAs).



1. Background

The Welsh Government is developing a new agricultural policy – the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). Since EU-exit the Welsh Government has maintained the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) system of support in Wales. However, from 2025 it is anticipated that the SFS will be introduced, and the CAP system phased out.

The SFS proposals are currently under consultation (due to close on 7 March). Under the proposals, farmers would be rewarded for actions above the minimum legal requirements, supporting farmers in terms of environmental, animal welfare and social outcomes.

All farmers participating in the SFS (as proposed) would be required to carry out a suite of ‘Universal Actions’ for which they would receive the ‘Universal Baseline Payment’. Building on this, non-compulsory ‘Optional’ and ‘Collaborative’ actions would then be available for additional reward.

The current plans follow several consultations (most recently the draft Sustainable Farming Scheme in 2022) and a co-design project where farmers have fed into the scheme design.

Note this petition was submitted prior to the latest proposals which are detailed below.

2. Welsh Government action

During the development of the SFS, a key area of contention has been the proposed Universal Action for farmers to have at least 10% tree cover on their farm, managed in line with the UK Forestry Standard. Existing trees and woodland would be counted towards this minimum requirement.

This requirement was proposed in the 2022 consultation (page 38) as an avenue to work towards the target to create 43,000ha of new woodland by 2030 to help mitigate climate change. This 10% tree cover requirement was alongside another Universal Action for farmers to manage at least 10% of their land to maintain and enhance semi-natural habitats.

There was concern from farmers that this Universal Action would not be feasible, and would therefore preclude participation in the SFS. Environmental groups welcomed the requirement while emphasising the 'right tree in the right place' principle to ensure the environmental benefits.

Arguments against the 10% tree cover requirement included:

- it will be difficult for some farmers to achieve if their land is not suitable for tree planting e.g. upland and coastal farms;
- it may not be possible for common land farmers and tenant farmers to achieve due to restrictions in their contracts;
- it would take land out of production with associated concerns regarding business viability and food security;
- trees planted in the wrong places e.g. on peatland could have a detrimental environmental impact; and
- a lack of local native tree nurseries to provide saplings could risk disease spread if trees need to be imported.

The benefits identified included:

- shelter belts;
- animal shelter;
- biosecurity (distance between neighbouring farms);
- water quality protection and buffer strips;
- biodiversity enhancement; and
- climate change mitigation.

More can be read in the analysis of feedback to the outline scheme proposals and the co-design report.

Following the stakeholder concerns, the Welsh Government announced that changes were being explored so the tree cover requirement would not be 10% of the entire holding, but 10% of the remaining area once unsuitable areas have been identified.

The proposals were updated and the final SFS consultation was published on 14 December 2023. The Universal Action on tree cover has been amended (page 41 of the consultation) from the 2022 design:

We have refined this minimum tree cover requirement to address the concerns you raised about unplantable areas. For example:

- Some tenant farmers may not be able to plant trees or manage existing woodland due to the tenancy agreement.
- Permanent features such as roads, yards, hard standings, ponds cannot be planted.
- It would not be appropriate to plant trees in priority or high-quality habitats such as peatland.

This means the 10% tree cover requirement will not be calculated on the whole farm area, rather it will be calculated on the remaining area once these unplantable areas have been removed from the calculation.

The consultation also includes reference to other sensitivities which will be considered on a farm-by-farm basis to determine if an area is suitable for planting. It considers how best to address exposed high altitude or coastal locations.

NFU Cymru remains concerned that the minimum 10% tree cover scheme rule is likely to “prove a barrier to entry for many businesses”.

The Minister for Rural Affairs, North Wales and Trefnydd, Lesley Griffiths, highlights in her paper on this petition that:

Unlike the current Basic Payment Scheme, trees and woodlands will be included in the land area which generate farmers’ payments, so I hope farmers can once again learn to value the multiple benefits provided by trees.

3. Welsh Parliament action

The 10% tree cover requirement has been discussed in Plenary on several occasions with questions from several Members. For example, you can read the discussions and Minister’s responses in the transcript from 11 July 2023.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.