

## **HRLN 42 - Evidence from: Nature Friendly Farming Network Wales**

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

**Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith | Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee**

**Atal a gwrthdroi colli natur erbyn 2030 | Halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030**

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## NFFN Cymru Response

### **Your views on the effectiveness of current policies / funds / statutory duties in halting and reversing the loss of nature by 2030.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

#### **State of Nature in Wales**

The [State of Nature report](#) highlights serious ongoing biodiversity declines. Welsh wildlife has decreased on average by 20% since 1994, and one in six (18%) of Welsh species are threatened with extinction. This situation must be urgently addressed.

#### **Funding**

The current agricultural budget for Wales is half the amount required to meet nature restoration and climate targets through farming and land use. A [new independent economic report](#) finds that Welsh Government needs to significantly increase investment in nature-friendly farming - to £594 million per year - to ensure legally binding nature restoration and climate targets are met. Whilst the ambition set out in the WG's Sustainable Farming Scheme is commendable, the scheme needs to be adequately funded if we are to deliver the scheme's environmental objectives.

#### **Agri-Environment Schemes**

Results from the [Glastir Monitoring and Evaluation Programme](#) show land in the agri-environment scheme is more heavily dominated by semi-natural habitat than Wales as a whole, but there is little difference in overall condition and habitat diversity. Although, habitats in the scheme are generally better connected with the exception of woodlands. Opportunities to improve these outcomes include simplification of the woodland scheme, better targeting of other scheme offerings, and consistent support through time across all schemes to allow for lags in ecological responses.

## **Designated Sites**

NRW's [\*\*Protected Sites Baseline Evaluation review\*\*](#) tells us that, where we do have the information on the features of interest, around 60% are in unfavourable condition. We are concerned whether NRW has sufficient resources and capacity to engage in meaningful and constructive discussions with farmers on how to best manage designated sites, as well as the lack of funding to support SSSI management through management agreements.

## **Your views on current arrangements for monitoring biodiversity.**

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

### **Designated Sites Monitoring**

We have concerns regarding NRW's capacity to effectively monitor designated sites. NRW's [\*\*Protected Sites Baseline Evaluation review\*\*](#) highlights that more information is needed on nearly 50% of the species and habitats of interest on our protected sites. The lack of information will need to be addressed through the development of innovative and more collaborative monitoring programmes, using the information gained to help steer the future management of protected sites.

### **Agri-Environment Scheme Monitoring**

Agri-environment schemes (AES) have been [\*\*criticized\*\*](#) for being inadequately monitored and for not delivering the expected benefits to nature. The previous Glastir agri-environment lacked monitoring and follow up farm advisory visits during the delivery phase. Many farmers are therefore in the dark as to what positive effects their management practices have had, particularly on biodiversity and the wider environment. Increased monitoring can help in this respect whilst addressing issues surrounding data gaps and inaccurate reporting.

As we transition to more flexible AES arrangements, the concept of non-prescriptive habitat management options will be unfamiliar for many farmers. Many will want to be reassured that they're undertaking appropriate management or are on the right path towards achieving agreed outcomes. Waiting towards the end of the contract period to review and agree any corrective action is not a sensible approach. Farmers should be able to arrange follow up visits with their contract manager/ advisor to rectify management as early as possible, giving farmers the peace of mind that they're undertaking the most appropriate management. This is vital in order to improve the quality of the scheme and ensure value for money. After all, you can't manage what you don't measure.

## Your views on new approaches needed to halt and reverse the loss of nature by 2030.

(We would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words).

### Results based Agri-environment Schemes

Traditional agri-environment schemes have been overly prescriptive, with very little room for flexibility and adaptive management. Quality control usually involves farmers having to comply with rigid a rigid stocking regime or maintaining a certain sward height throughout the year. For example, the latest [WG consultation on the Sustainable Farming Scheme](#) details the management prescriptions for enclosed semi-natural dry grassland (p.29), which follows the traditional payment system that is prescription bases, outlining when or what a farmer must do or must not do to receive a payment. Whilst the aims for this habitat type are welcomed, we don't believe the management requirements will lead to the desired outcomes. For example, compliance with seasonal sward height requirements - which can be as low as 5cm during the summer - is not a guaranteed recipe for successful semi-natural grassland management.

We urge the WG to transition away from this traditional approach towards a [results-based payment approach](#). This approach offers farmers the flexibility to use their knowledge and experience to manage the land in a way that delivers agreed environmental [results](#) alongside their food and fibre production activities.

The farmer is in principle free to do what fits the site, the weather of the year, the farm and her or his own situation - it is only the environmental results that counts. Results can be measured robustly and effectively via an annual [scorecard assessment](#) which factors criteria such as key indicator species, their frequency, as well as structural diversity.

There is good evidence that payments based on results can [improve environmental benefits](#), particularly compared to action based scheme, and increase farmer engagement where they are taking more ownership of results. This approach can help with facilitating [behavioural change](#) towards habitat management.

Wales could learn a lot from [Ireland](#) in this regard, who have a lot of experience in developing results-based approaches by, for example, providing actual farm plans and scoring sheets, as well as detailing governance mechanisms, the role of advisory services, the choice of indicators, monitoring details and the relationship between results and payment.

We recommend that the WG continue supporting trial work for this approach in Wales, similar to the [Llyn Payment for Outcomes Trial](#), which can provide valuable blueprint that could be replicated as part of future schemes.