

**Wales YFC's Response to the National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee's Inquiry into
Sustainable Land Management**



Introduction

YFC Wales would like to thank the National Assembly for Wales Environmental and Sustainability Committee for the opportunity to put across their points of view.

Background

Wales YFC is made up of just under 6,000 Young members aged between 10 -26 from across Wales. We are a progressive movement that readily embraces change for the better and encourages the development of the countries rural youth.

What do we want sustainable land management in Wales to look like and what outcomes do we want to deliver in the short, medium and longer term?

Sustainable land management in Wales needs to cover three main areas: environment, wildlife, but crucially, livestock production. Any farmer knows that the three go hand in hand and that one cannot be successful without the other.

Sustainability too often is understood to mean maintenance of an environment. However, an environment has very little value for the future without people in it. Therefore, for land management to be sustainable in Wales, it must not only mean that we safeguard our environment, but also that we safeguard the future of our communities and those living and working within them. If we neglect the latter, then communities will wither and die.

As farmers we hear much talk about how Welsh and British farming can cope with the ever increasing world population. However, before we look at the world, we need first to look at ourselves. We believe that a sustainable land management system in Wales first needs to sustain us, the people of Wales and Britain.

Short term goals in farming (at least those of any real value) are hard to achieve. We therefore think that we need to look at the long term success, with making Wales more self-sufficient as a priority. This is alongside the environmental aspects of farming and land management. There are savings to be made in the reduction of our carbon footprint by precision farming, improved breeding which require lower inputs, and innovative equipment. An unproductive Wales will always require high input which will generate a higher carbon footprint.

What are the barriers preventing us from delivering these outcomes now? How do we overcome these challenges?

Some of the barriers in existence are created by the focus purely around the environment and small wildlife: almost a blinkered approach "for the being" rather than considering a long term, joined up strategy. Whilst we fully support the new Glastir schemes, we also need to remember that our countryside is also there to protect our livestock. An example to illustrate this point is the double fencing and replanting of old hedges. Whilst this is good farming practice and provides habitats for wildlife, a useful and sustainable addition to this would be allowing the hedge to regrow and then laying the hedge in the traditional styles, with a tight fence so that the hedge affords wind and rain protection during hard winter months to new born stock. A hedge which is tightly trimmed will remain thick at the base for considerably more years than a hedge that is allowed to grow out and up. This will provide good conditions of wildlife, whilst also achieving an objective in assisting with livestock. However, our understanding of the schemes at present is that overlapping payments are not permissible. Therefore, if a payment has been received under one system, then the farmer's hands are somewhat tied.

Whilst an improving picture, we believe that public perception of how tax-payers' money is spent amongst British agriculture is poor. A further attack on the public perception of our industry is the badger cull in England, and the coverage that this has received. This coverage has focussed very much on the badgers, with too little consideration of the heart-break suffered by farmers

losing their livestock which in certain cases has taken generations to build. This has reinforced for us that far stronger links need to be made with the British, and in this case Welsh, public. Whilst we can (and do) strive to address this, we cannot do it alone.



Our opinion is that the public perception of how the tax-payers' money is spent is poor. The perception is that large amounts of money are given to farmers, and they do not understand where the return is. In reality, this money is provided to help the population feed their families for less. With ever-increasing costs, our end product has to generate more than break-even. However, there is a fine line between making enough to survive and pricing ourselves out of the market.

If we are happy to compete with producers in Brazil who have liberalised land management rules and producers in New Zealand who have access to a wider variety of medications and a liberalised approach to pest control, then something has to balance with that, if we want to continue to have food production carried out within Wales in future.

Therefore, with the in-coming CAP payment reforms (the detail of which is still under consultation) this is likely to become still tighter. The new CAP payments will one of the main driving factors behind how food production is delivered and confidence needs to be built amongst the agricultural community that we will be in a position to cope with the cuts in payments in years to come. We understand that the playing field is far from flat, but we also need to feel that our government is prepared to work alongside us, rather than regularly moving the goal posts.

What are the main policy drivers and how can these be shaped to overcome these challenges?

As mentioned above, we often hear talk of how farming will cope with the increasing world population. This suggests that the government wants us to produce food. However, this is then contradicted by the "greening" element of Glastir, encouraging 75% permanent pasture; the two simply do not co-exist (assuming that our understanding of what is meant by permanent pasture is correct). A clearer message needs to be provided: it is exceedingly difficult to plan a sustainable business enterprise when priorities and agendas are changed with frequency.

We consider that a key driver must be limiting the carbon footprint of our food production. Carbon loss can be minimised by encouraging and incentivising the use of innovation (for example slot seeding and stitching of land) that delivers more productive methods which keep efficiency high. Higher efficiency from land will mean lower fertilizer use and fuel and accordingly a lower carbon footprint.

As stated above, we await the outcome of the new proposals for CAP. This poses a dilemma, as our clear feeling is that these two issues need to be approached hand in hand, and our response to this consultation, may be altered if the proposals for CAP change.

How we define the key ecosystems and ecosystem services in a way that makes sense for Wales?

Ecosystems are about balance, but this balance should not just be concerned with the natural environment. The population of Wales is growing, and we need to ensure that the balance within the ecosystems is preserved, but in a way that works for our population and makes sense for Wales. This includes our needs to eat and to live. Therefore, we need to consider the need to produce food, energy and housing in a sustainable way to satisfy these needs.

There must be a responsible use of renewables in conserving eco-systems. Further work can be done to encourage farmers, landowners and the population at large to embrace renewable energy. However, we need to consider that there is only so much land mass within Wales, and therefore if we are to sustain growth balancing each of the above needs, then building on what we already have has to be the way forward. For example, encouraging use of roof-top solar panels, rather than moving to solar fields.

We also should ensure that the balance between wildlife is preserved, whilst considering how farming has historically been a part of that ecosystem. For example, the rise in the incidence of bTB has coincided with the ban in on-farm burial of fallen stock. Whilst not in possession of empirical data, we question whether this interruption of feeding sources for carnivorous scavengers such as badgers has led to greater roaming areas, and accordingly a wider spread of disease. It can also not be coincidental that numbers of ground nesting birds and small mammals have fallen in tandem with this.



How we develop a baseline from which to measure progress? This includes how we collect, coordinate and use data to support sustainable land management in Wales.

The consultation requests a suggested baseline from which to measure progress as to how self-sufficient we are as a country. In the early 1980s, we were 78% self-sufficient, and today 58.9% self-sufficient. This means that a staggering 40% of what we consume is imported into the country. The Welsh population alone has grown by 5% since 2001 to 3,063,456 in 2011. This is a trend that is likely to continue. We therefore suggest that 58.9% is used as a baseline and that we encourage our farmers to continue to produce some of the best quality food in the world and to expand production accordingly.

How we ensure that our sustainable land management policies maintain vibrant rural communities and attract new entrants into the land-based sector?

You ask how we can ensure that policy maintains vibrant rural communities and attracts new entrants into the land-based sectors. We consider that before we look at encouraging new entrants, we need to secure a future for those who are already in those sectors. We see many young farmers who have to hold multiple jobs in order to permit them to stay afloat or to get that first step on the ladder towards self-employment. The land-based sector will not look appealing until it is a profitable career. Whilst we can look to other income streams, such as renewable energy, to generate additional income, but the fact remains that we call ourselves farmers and we are here to produce.

Attracting new entrants to the land-based sector has to take a focus on young people. We are well placed to assist in the delivery of this objective given our membership demographic. We hear from our members the complaint that careers advice (especially for academic young people) is poorly informed of the opportunities within the land-based sectors and an understanding of the avenues for entrance could be greatly improved. When taking decisions about future careers, young people will consider whether they can make a sustainable future for themselves in their career of choice. This goes back to having adequate food, housing, and cheap energy. Too often rural communities suffer from limited affordable housing, high fuel costs and limited access to broadband. The drive towards online only provision of services is problematic if those trying to access those services simply cannot get online. This has to be taken into account when policies are developed relating to the dissemination of information and how rural communities are supported. Also, for many rural young people, the ability to live near where you work is a critical factor in a sustainable future. Planning rules must reflect the needs of the community as a whole, not just the establishment whose voices are loudest.

Finally, the message we often receive from our members is that they need to be allowed to farm, rather than being straitjacketed by paperwork or required to become rangers. We want to produce food for our country, and in doing so, we believe that we can also deliver a sustainable land use as high productivity is entwined with good land management practices.

If there are key actions we can take to deliver short-term 'quick wins' and the actions we should be taking for the long-term?

It is difficult to achieve quick wins when there are so many "unknowns" at present (in respect of how CAP will develop in future and the support that will be available). However, one suggestion would be to incentivise use of solar panels on roofs and other existing structures to safeguard the Welsh land mass from being used for this.

Also, a key priority should be that civil servants and those charged with administering whatever schemes or controls are put in place are fully trained and familiar with those schemes and the options available to those using them. This applies equally across multi-agencies, as too often, staff are not able to assist and “no-one seems to know the answer” with unrealistic deadlines set. Thorough planning is vital to sound delivery.



Again, promoting pan-Welsh access to high speed broadband that allows rural businesses to function fully is essential before any move is made towards compulsory use of online facilities. This means that face-to-face and telephone support must remain available until that time.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this in more detail.