

## **Environment and Sustainability Committee's evidence session on which agricultural issues Welsh Government should prioritise over the next twelve months.**

Approximately 80% of Wales is farmed, however it is widely recognised that land management must deliver significantly more than just food e.g. environmental goods and services, a countryside in which nature can thrive, landscapes that are enjoyed by people and support tourism and recreation industries. RSPB Cymru believes that the *Strategy* is the ideal opportunity to reevaluate the *purpose* of farming and bring agriculture into Welsh Government's developing National Natural Resource Management Framework to ensure that farming supports the delivery of environmental targets as well as food production.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in this evidence session and believe that The Welsh Government should prioritise the following issues over the coming 12 months:

1. **Fully implement the recommendations of the Glastir Evaluation Panel**, which was established in October 2014 in order to provide an independent evaluation of Glastir Advanced. Many of the panel's recommendations are broadly similar to those of RSPB Cymru and other environmental NGOs who have been calling for:
  - Welsh Government to work with the conservation NGOs to refine the target maps for habitats and species to ensure that the appropriate action is targeted in the right places to benefit nature.
  - The scheme to become an effective means of securing all of the required management for objectives. For wildlife this means securing enough habitats, in the appropriate condition, location and combination at the right times of the year i.e. providing the full ecological requirements for nature.
  - Cooperative action between agreement holders to enable the delivery of the wider landscape-scale approach. It is particularly important for species as many have quite complex habitat requirements that cannot be secured within individual farm boundaries. This approach is also essential to secure water benefits through catchment scale management.
  - Those providing advice and guidance to farmers to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to do so and for farmers to receive on going support once they are in the scheme.
  - Scheme documentation (maps and agreements) needs to be improved. In their current format they are overly complex, lack clarity and risk acting as a barrier to effective delivery.
  
2. Changes to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) must not reduce Welsh Government's ability or ambition to **use the RDP to meet its environmental/biodiversity obligations by 2020**. Amendments to Pillar 1 payments will almost certainly result in increased support for upland farmers, however these payments will not guarantee the increase in environmentally beneficial land management required by Welsh Government to meet its environmental commitments, including halting the declines of farmland wildlife and getting protected sites in good condition. This can only be achieved, at the scale required, through the targeted use of Pillar 2 funds via schemes such as Glastir. The current uncertainty associated with CAP payments highlights the need for Welsh Government to **establish clear targets for Glastir regarding the extent of change that it is expected to**

**achieve**, including its contribution towards biodiversity targets. This will then inform decisions regarding how much RDP money is required to meet commitments and where in Wales it must be spent. This recommendation is also made in the Auditor General for Wales Report on Glastir (September 2014) and in observations made by the EU on Wales' draft RDP.

3. The EU's observation letter on the [Welsh] Rural Development Programme 2014 – 2020 highlights the need for the **RDP to be more closely aligned with environmental strategies**, including biodiversity. In particular the EU made it clear that woodland management must benefit nature and requested that "Welsh Government provide more detail on how the Forestry Management Plans will contribute to fulfilling the targets of the biodiversity strategy". The lack of effective action for priority woodland biodiversity *via* Glastir has been an ongoing concern for the conservation NGOs. Having been involved in the initial development of the Woodland Management element, as a collective we are extremely worried by the apparent lack of progress towards completing the design and delivery of what could be a good woodland management scheme for nature. Given the importance of Welsh woodlands, many of which are designated for the national and internationally important habitats and species they support Welsh Government must **prioritise the establishment of a Woodland Management Scheme that is an effective means of securing conservation benefits for priority woodland habitats and species**. RSPB Cymru is concerned that reduced capacity within Welsh Government may be a contributory factor to why the scheme design is yet to be completed to the required standard; if this proves to be the case Welsh Government must move to address this.
4. The **Agriculture Strategy** is the first test of Welsh Government's ability to (a) deliver integrated land management policy following passing of the Future Generations Bill and (b) apply the principles of Natural Resource Management (NRM) to a strategy that will directly impact 80% of the land (natural resources) in Wales. As such the *Strategy* must:
  - be fully aligned with the principles of Sustainable Development and The Welsh Government's developing National Natural Resource Management Policy framework,
  - protect and enhance soils, water, habitats and species to enable Welsh Government to meet its EU targets,
  - promote the sustainable production of adequate amounts of high quality food based on the highest environmental and animal welfare standards.
  - support HNV farming systems as required by Europe and essential if Wales is to achieve environmental targets and secure wider societal benefits
5. Welsh Government has an obligation to **identify, maintain and monitor High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems**, which are typically extensive farms, often found in the uplands. HNV farms are usually the most financially vulnerable as they are unable to compete with more intensive farming sectors, however they are highly important for the priority species and habitats they support and the wider environmental benefits (carbon and water) that they secure for society. For Welsh Government to achieve its commitments to HNV farming RSPB Cymru recommends that:
  - the definition of HNV, currently being developed by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) as part of the Glastir and Evaluation and Monitoring Programme (GMEP) must incorporate important habitats and species. The current proposal is based on habitats alone, and
  - the identity, distribution and wider importance of HNV farming need to be better understood within Welsh Government so that future policies reflect the wider value of these farming systems and help to maintain and support them in continuing to secure multiple environmental benefits for society, provide nature with places to thrive as well as producing quality food.