

Farming, the environment and the Welsh Uplands

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This report brings together evidence on farming in the uplands of Wales and its impact on the environment, considering agricultural, environment and economic trends. It is written within the context of:

- the UK's vote to leave the European Union and thus the Common Agricultural Policy,
- Welsh Government's 2018 proposed support package for agriculture that promotes economic resilience and public goods, and
- a variety of social and environmental pressures.

Indeed, the Common Agricultural Policy is accused of failing to achieve several of its aims, including providing a reasonable income for farmers and protect the natural environment. At the same time, it is being increasingly realised that upland agricultural areas offer the potential to provide many services, including ecosystem services such as carbon and water storage, in addition to food and fibre production, and tourism which are more commonly associated with such regions.

Agricultural trends: Livestock grazing is overwhelmingly the main land use in the Welsh uplands, and while the majority of holdings are engaged in this type of farming many may also offer opportunities for more environmentally-friendly land management.

The average age of farmers continues to rise, although recent attempts to encourage younger people into agriculture have yet to be assessed. Meanwhile, the numbers of sheep and cattle are at a high level when considered in historic terms, although they have declined recently, for example:

from 1867 it took nearly a century for sheep numbers to double from 2.5 to 5 million. It took less than 30 years, from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s for numbers to double again to 10 million. About 90% of sheep in Wales are in the uplands.

These factors combine to offer much potential for resilient ecosystems based on appropriate grazing and other management practices.

Environmental trends: Many natural resources, including habitat condition and species numbers, are generally poor and declining, even in protected areas and for 'priority' species and habitats. Direct and indirect human action is heavily implicated in this. Wales' first State of Natural Resources Report has shown that none of Wales' ecosystems, on which we all depend are resilient¹ and goes on to say that unsustainable farming is a key reason why:

- soil quality has deteriorated across all habitats apart from woodland.
- 63% of all freshwater bodies are not achieving good status.
- increasing levels of ammonia from agriculture are affecting air quality.
- with regards biodiversity:
 - 56% of UK species monitored have declined and
 - 1 in 14 species in Wales is threatened with extinction with 57% wild plants, 60% butterflies and 40% birds in decline²

¹ Natural Resources Wales. 2016. The State of Natural Resources Report, 2016.

² State of Nature, 2016.



The recently published State of Birds in Wales 2018 identifies the ongoing declines of farmland birds as a particular conservation concern including many upland species such as curlew, golden plover, black grouse and ring ouzel³.

A few successes have been recorded, including specific habitat-related projects such as peat bog restoration through ditch-blocking, which secure multiple environmental and social benefits. However, ecological and human systems are complex, and conflicting priorities are frequent. There is a significant lack of knowledge and information in many areas, despite increasing amounts of citizen science.

Economic trends: Average farm incomes appear to have risen slightly in recent years, but remain heavily dependent on direct support (subsidies). A rise in obsolete holdings is notable, even though nearly 7,000 were removed from the records in 2014. While businesses fail for all sorts of reasons this number of 'lost' holdings in a heavily supported industry must surely be a sign of that support's failure.

Relatedly, farming employment opportunities continue to decline, and there have been more part time than full time farmers since the early 2000s. The contribution of upland agriculture to the Welsh economy is difficult to assess, but store cattle and lambs are the main outputs and account for about 8% of Welsh agriculture's input into the economy. In 2012 the economic value of the environment was estimated as being about £9 billion, a restored environment would be worth considerably more⁴.

Current support isn't protecting the environment, keeping farm businesses viable, or farmers on the land. Holdings continue to become obsolete, and increasing numbers of farmers are having to find other work, with farming becoming a part-time source of income.

The future: Leaving the EU presents a unique opportunity to develop integrated policies and practises that help restore and maintain farming (and land management), rural communities and nature. A new system of support should encourage farming and land management practices that are appropriate to the sustainable potential of the land. This includes appropriate stocking levels and the restoration and maintenance of habitats. Key areas where the future investment of public funds should be considered include:

- supporting High Nature Value farming and agro-ecological practices,
- the efficient production and marketing of 'nature-friendly' products,
- developing payment for ecosystem services schemes and
- land sparing activities such as woodland creation and rewilding.

In addition, new schemes must be well thought out, flexible and practical and there must be much greater engagement by policymakers, farmers and the environment sector if a real difference is to be made. There must also be better evidence on the link between farming and nature than what currently exists and consistently available follow-up data is vital if long-term change is to be effective.

Finally, the report includes a case study that shows how two upland farmers are managing to maintain their farms, produce high quality food and look after nature.

The full report can be found by contacting arfon.williams@rspb.org.uk

³ State of Birds in Wales, 2018

⁴ National Ecosystem Assessment, 2012.

