

## Parliamentary briefing: Report stage of the Agriculture Bill

7 May 2020

### **Greener UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link are asking MPs to put their names to, or support and vote for, the following amendments:**

Secure long-term funding for sustainable farming	(Amendment 5)
Trade policy that does not undermine UK farmers	(New clause 2)

### **Setting the Agriculture Bill in context**

The Agriculture Bill is an unprecedented opportunity to revitalise the countryside in a way that meets the needs of people, farming, food and the environment. Greener UK and Wildlife and Countryside Link believe in a food and farming system that encourages nature and landscapes to thrive, supports livelihoods and local communities, ensures animal welfare standards, and has public health and wellbeing at its heart. If the UK is to develop both a long-term plan for nature's recovery and a long-term plan for food and farming, it must ensure both approaches are joined up and united around an ambition to protect and enhance the ecosystems that underpin sustainable nature-friendly farming - our soils, freshwater and natural habitats.

Covid-19 has shone an unforgiving light on the inequity of the global food system and its consequences for nature and people. In the context of an ongoing climate and environment emergency, it is likely that the shocks experienced by our food and farming system in the current crisis foreshadow further disruption in the years and decades ahead. In the short term, Government is already able to provide emergency aid to affected sectors, as has happened recently with the dairy sector.

This crisis should, therefore, accelerate the debate about how to build a food and farming system that is resilient, healthy and regenerative, for people and nature. The Agriculture Bill, and its proposed focus on 'public money for public goods', will be a crucial part of this, and is essential to meeting a range of environmental, public access and animal welfare commitments. Maintaining this core principle in the bill is a top priority for our organisations. The public goods that farmers will be rewarded for are contained in Clause 1(1) of the bill.

The Agriculture Bill is not the totality of food and farming policy in England. Other strategies will be needed to address issues such as healthy eating, food poverty and food security. In this context, the National Food Strategy should be fast tracked to ensure action to address these and other urgent priorities, alongside the Agriculture Bill.

However, the Agriculture Bill and a focus on public goods is the right starting point. It is one of the most important steps that the Government and Parliament can take to fight the climate and environment emergency, and in doing so, set farming and food production up to be resilient in the face of an uncertain future.

## Greener UK and Link priorities at Commons Report stage

The Agriculture Bill is a once in a generation opportunity to move towards a more sustainable, agroecological food and farming system, that is resilient to future change. While we strongly support the core principle of ‘public money for public goods’ in the bill, several improvements are still needed. In particular, the bill needs to: provide greater clarity on the long-term funding framework and on how budgets will be set; ensure high standards in future trade deals and that UK farmers are not undercut by low standard imports; and provide for the development of a new regulatory framework for farming and land management in England.

## Priority amendments

We ask MPs to put their names to, or support and vote for, the following amendments:

### High standards trade policy - NC2 on import standards

In order to increase the **resilience and sustainability of UK food and farming**, and achieve environmental and animal welfare goals, it is vital that farmers in the UK are **not undercut by imported food produced to lower standards**. In some cases, imported products may have been produced in ways that would be illegal in the UK, creating unfair competition and limiting the capacity of UK farmers to deliver public goods such as healthy soils and climate change mitigation. **NC2 would secure legal safeguards** on environmental, plant health and animal welfare standards of imports.

### Securing funding for farmers and nature – amendment 5 on long-term budgets

There is currently no long-term funding framework outlined in the bill, with the new ‘multi-annual financial plans’ not requiring a budget to be set for the associated financial assistance schemes. A long-term funding framework in the bill would build on **the Conservative manifesto commitment to maintain funding** and provide the certainty that farmers need to have confidence in these reforms. Any budgets for these multi-annual financial assistance plans should reflect the scale of financial need associated with the aims of the bill, targets in the Environment Bill, and needs of the climate and environment emergency.

## **Other priorities**

### **A new regulatory framework**

A strong set of baseline environmental, animal welfare and public access standards that are widely applied by farmers is needed, so that activity above this baseline can be rewarded as 'public goods'. The current regulatory regime is far from perfect to begin with, and important elements of it will be lost now the UK has left the EU, such as protections for soils and hedgerows. The bill must introduce powers to protect the environment and animal welfare and better regulate farming and land management, building on our current baseline standards. This is a major gap in the bill at present.

### **Sustainable productivity**

Ministers should ensure that all spending on productivity measures contributes to the provision of public goods, securing win-wins for farming and the environment, and contributing towards more sustainable and humane food production. To not do so risks replicating the incoherence and inefficiencies of the Common Agricultural Policy.

### **A fair, resilient and transparent supply chain**

It is vital that the Agriculture Bill improves fairness in the supply chain. There have been welcome changes made to the bill to broaden the powers on supply chain transparency and fair dealing. An amendment is now needed to place a duty on ministers to actually use the powers in the bill that would better regulate the relationship between farmers and the purchasers of agricultural products.

### **A just transition**

The stepped transition set out in the bill must be matched with advice and support to help farmers through this change. Small farms are just as well placed as larger farms to provide the public goods that the bill lists in clause 1. Large farms are, however, more likely to have access to business planning resources and expert advice; the bill must therefore include the provision of advice to help smaller farms adapt to the new system.

### **An ambitious National Food Strategy**

The bill should not be seen as the totality of government food and farming policy. The whole food and farming system needs urgent reform, and the Agriculture Bill should just be the start. Defra are in the midst of developing a food strategy, which needs to address issues such as healthier eating, food poverty and food security. This should include the Food and Farming Sector Deal, national action plans such as that for pesticides, and consideration of public procurement, and research and development in the sector. These broader policies should seek to promote healthier, more sustainable food. Support through the Agriculture Bill for organic and other regenerative forms of agriculture will be an important part of this, but the bill alone will not be enough.

## Further information about the Agriculture Bill

### What the Bill will do

The Agriculture Bill grants the government powers to develop post-Brexit farming and land management legislation and policies in England, with specific schedules granting more limited powers to the Welsh Government and Department for Environment, Agriculture and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland. Specifically, it:

- grants powers to give financial assistance for a range of purposes largely relating to services undersupplied by the market – also known as public goods – such as environmental improvement, public access and climate change mitigation; in addition, to these, it provides similar powers for the purpose of improving agricultural productivity and ‘ancillary activities’
- grants powers to amend retained EU law, specifically relating to the CAP
- outlines a time limited transition period of seven years for the withdrawal of direct payments, with associated powers to effect this transition
- grants powers to collect and share data, and to set marketing standards
- grants powers to improve transparency in the supply chain through support to establish Producer Organisations and to regulate the relationship between farmers and purchasers of agricultural products
- outlines the exceptional circumstances that would justify market intervention, and the powers to do so
- outlines the approach to meeting World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules

### Changes from the Agriculture Bill tabled in September 2018

In addition to these clauses, the bill tabled on 16 January 2020 includes a range of new provisions. These include (amongst others):

- New financial assistance purposes in clause 1, adding conserving native breeds of livestock, rare agricultural plants and improving soil quality
- A new duty to have regard to food production when designing financial assistance schemes, and to the production of food in an ‘environmentally sustainable way’
- Major new provisions requiring Ministers to establish a multi-annual financial assistance plan, annual reports on financial assistance given, and a requirement to monitor the impact of any financial assistance
- A duty to report to parliament every five years on the UK’s food security
- A broadening of the powers to regulate the relationship between farmers and the purchasers of agricultural goods, from just the ‘first’ purchasers, to all ‘business purchases’, incorporating more of the supply chain
- New powers relating to agricultural tenancies, including a provision to ensure that tenants can secure better access to public goods schemes.

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