

Environment Secretary shares agricultural plans at Groundswell



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Can I just start by thanking Paul Cherry and the organisers of Groundswell. I came to this for the first time last year but it's amazing to see such creative thought, such new ideas being pioneered, new agronomic techniques, and in many cases of course a rediscovery of old agronomic techniques that we let go of many years ago.

I wanted to start by admitting my great fear with this journey that we're on around our future policy. My own officials will be very aware of this. We might have something that's conceptually very good, that works, is the right thing to do, but then something will go wrong on delivery. And there's a reason for that. That is because the ecosystem and our environment doesn't always play to the rules that we set for it administratively, from the centre. It's complex.

I've always said that every agriculture minister or environment minister comes in to Defra with plans for the environment. And one of the first things they need to learn is that the environment has got plans for them too, and they're not always happy plans.

And so for me, it's really important that we change the way we run the schemes, creating the space for innovation, the space to trial new things, the space to adjust things and tailor them to an individual landscape and even an individual farm. And I don't want to dwell too much on what it was like being in the European Union. We spent quite enough time arguing about that for four years, and it was very divisive.

But I wanted to just say this. I was a minister for three or four years when we were in the European Union. And every single day of my life I was confronted by officials and lawyers in the department about something called 'disallowance risk'. And every time we said "Let's try this", "Let's do something differently", "Let's cut back some of the paperwork", "Let's try to

simplify things”, we would always come up against this disallowance risk – the EU penalty regime against national governments. Every single year, the UK Government was fined £100 million for not filling out things the right way or recording things the way the EU law required.

We’ve got a great opportunity now to do things differently, to have a different approach. And I know often it’s said that farmers need to change – we’ve got this challenge to Net Zero, problems of biodiversity. “We need farmers to change” is often the cry, but we also need the government to change. We also need the way that government agencies interact with farmers to change. And now that we’ve left the European Union, we’re free to do that for the first time ever.

At the beginning of this year, I had something that was really encouraging, and that is a farmer who said to me that he’d be involved with the Farming in Protected Landscapes scheme. And he and a number of others since have said it is the best scheme that Defra have ever run. And that for me is encouraging because it’s also the first scheme that Defra has ever run on its own terms without trying to rubber stamp and implement an EU scheme.

What people like about Farming in Protected Landscapes was the fact that it was very flexible. A farmer would have an idea for something that would work on his holding in that landscape, or a group of farmers would come together, and they would then talk to an advisor from Natural England and they would work out what could be done, what might change. And there would be this partnership between the National Parks, some of our advisors in Natural England, and the farmers themselves, to come up with something quite thoughtful and creative that worked in that landscape. So it was very flexible.

And they also liked the fact that there were real human advisors involved. It wasn’t filling out a form, getting into a problem online, going on a helpline and being stuck for an hour waiting for someone to answer the phone and then maybe they didn’t have the answer anyway. There’d be that human interaction, somebody who’d walk the farm, sit down around the kitchen table, and put together something that worked.

We’re about to launch the Sustainable Farming Incentive in a few days’ time, on 30 June, and we are trying really hard to make sure that we keep those principles of simplicity and that space for

things to be done differently.

There is no application window. There's no deadline. You can enrol any time you like. It opens next week, but if you're too busy at the moment, and you'd rather wait until August, do it then. If that's still too busy and you want to wait until the winter, you can join then, you can join any time of the year. And it's a rolling window, it never closes.

When you join you can expect your first payment in three months, and then you'll get a regular quarterly payment thereafter. No more racing to get forms in in time for a deadline. No more fretting that the cheque hasn't arrived on a particular date. A regular cash flow coming in to reflect those costs.

We've tried to make it far less prescriptive than the old schemes we had before. So we're not being prescriptive about what type of green cover crop you can use. I always remember visiting a Natural England field officer involved with the Countryside Stewardship schemes. He said in their landscape the flower mix that works for field boundaries on those chalky soils in Sussex actually wasn't prescribed centrally. And he says that the view was that it was so much effort to try to get permission to vary from the national rules that have been set down to abide by EU law, so prescriptive, that it was better just to say it's more trouble than it's worth, let's not bother.

What we have got to do in all these new schemes is to keep that flexibility.

Now we've started with soil, because soil is absolutely at the heart of successful profitable farming. And it is also, if we get things right, the first part of our ecosystem that will start to recover. So I have farmers who've adopted min-till or no-till systems, they find that within just three years the earthworm population can as much as triple. We know that the soil reacts quickly and we know that soil is absolutely central to successful farm production. That is why it's where we're starting with the first module of the SFI. But it is only the first module.

Next year, we are planning additional modules on nutrients which will build on the work we're doing on soils and help farmers deal with the cost of synthetically manufactured fertilisers at the moment. There will be a standard on hedgerows, because hedgerows are probably the single most important ecological

building block in our farm landscape, and managed well they can be a space in which nature can recover.

And finally, there's going to be a module on integrated pest management. When I was in agricultural college in the early 1990s, this was set to be the coming thing where we will gradually reduce our reliance on synthetic chemical pesticides using other natural predators, other agronomic techniques in conjunction with chemistry. It was seen as the big coming thing but it's been slow to come of age, slow to realise that potential - and what we want to do is to bridge the risk and help farmers manage the risk of embracing some of these techniques. You will see here at Groundswell some really exciting demonstration projects of where integrated pest management can be done really well. You'll see demonstrations around companion property. There are a lot of people now pioneering the use of buckwheat mixes going with arable crops in order to manage, for instance, the pressure of cabbage seed weevil in oilseed rape and having the right kind of buckwheat mix going in with that OSR crop can actually confuse the pest and reduce the pressure.

When it comes to intercropping, there's some quite interesting work being done about blending seed varieties so that you give them more resilience against pests and prevent pest pressure from building to these peak levels that you sometimes see in commercial situations. Some very interesting work being done there and also some work being done, for instance, to have a feed wheat and pea mix to create forage for livestock that can reduce pressure. There's some work being done around trap cropping, where crops like Lucerne are grown either in strips in the field or around field margins that can be used, for instance, to manage down pressures of things like the bean and pea weevil.

And finally, there's a role for predators and there's some very exciting work that I know I saw here last year, about creating habitats and predator strips that create the right habitat to attract the right kind of beetles, lacewings, other predators that can deal with a whole host of pests and actually manage down those pressures.

Integrated pest management has come of age, there's a great opportunity to take it forward, but there's a risk to farmers in engaging with it. There's a cultural tendency to think that the first time you spot a pest you better get out there and

prophylactically hit the crop with the chemical pesticides to make sure it doesn't take hold. And a lot of the culture behind integrated pest management is the patience of giving natural systems the chance to get on top of a situation. Sometimes there's a cost to that, and that's why government needs to recognise that and reward farmers who embrace these types of new approaches.

It's a very exciting time as we roll out our new policy. The policies we're rolling out are going to be supporting precisely the kind of new agronomic techniques that all of you will be seeing today and many of you will be engaged with. To get it right, I'm determined to ensure that we get that cultural change in the way we administer and run schemes that leaving the European Union finally allows us to do.

Thank you very much.

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