

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the changing landscape of UK agriculture and invites your thoughts on the subject.

One of the best things about Brexit is that we'll be saying goodbye, once and for all, to the EU's outrageous Common Agricultural Policy. It may sound as dull as pesticide-laden ditchwater, but it promises to be terrific news for the UK's wildlife.

This diabolical system of subsidies – mostly paid to EU farmers simply for owning or using farmland – is designed to guarantee higher yields through increasingly intensive farming. Quite simply, the more 'agricultural' land farmers control, the more money they get. But it's an unmitigated disaster because it provides a perverse incentive to clear wildlife habitats, even in areas that cannot be farmed, to produce the empty ground that qualifies for public handouts.

The Common Agricultural Policy is one of the main reasons we have lost so much wildlife across Europe. Yet it costs taxpayers more than £50 billion a year (£3.5 billion of which goes to farmers in the UK) and accounts for about 40 per cent of the entire EU budget. It's also incredibly unfair. Some wealthy landowners receive more than £1 million a year – and many don't even live in Europe. Saudi princes, Russian oligarchs and other affluent foreigners just have to own land here to scoop the rewards.

But that's all about to change in the biggest shake-up of agriculture in more than half a century. And it comes in the form of the Agriculture Bill 2019-21. The main body of the bill applies to England but, hopefully, there will be similarly ambitious and

transformational changes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, too. It could be life-changing.

There are many aspects to this new legislation, of course, because it covers everything from animal welfare to fairness in the supply chain. And there is a good dose of conservation: it puts a much stronger emphasis on improving the quality of soil, for example, and provides powers to prohibit or restrict the sale and use of certain pesticides.

But the bit that had me dancing around the office tackles those awful land subsidies, which will be phased out over a seven-year period starting in 2021. The plan is to pay farmers about £3 billion a year to protect wildlife and ecosystems – rather than simply for owning land. In other

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words, they will be paid to do things that are for the greater good – such as maintaining clean air and water, providing flood protection, improving public access and, best of all, encouraging wildlife – and that would otherwise bring no financial reward.

You could argue that no one should be paid simply for not doing something – in this case, not destroying wildlife habitats. Perhaps I should be paid a subsidy not to empty my dustbin out onto the street? It's all a bit topsy-turvy. A better solution would be to fine farmers (and anyone else) who destroy wildlife habitats. But that simply wouldn't work. With Natural England and the other regulatory bodies seemingly spiralling out of control, there would be virtually no monitoring or enforcement. Far better, under current circumstances, to put the onus on farmers to care for nature (some do already, of course, but most don't). And the best way to do that is to pay them money.

This is undoubtedly a groundbreaking bill. It's not perfect – there is no binding commitment to prevent trade deals allowing the import of food of a lower standard than that produced by British farmers, for instance – and, since it is still in embryonic stage, the devil will be in the detail as the bill is converted into policy. But it's undoubtedly a major step in the right direction. 🐾

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Will the future of UK farming provide better protection for wildlife?