

# A Common Countryside Policy



**Eleanor Harris** introduces Confor's new Brexit discussion paper

“Trees are not only a source of beauty and wonder, living evidence of our investment for future generations, they are also a carbon sink, a way to manage flood risk and a habitat for precious species.” So said Michael Gove in his policy speech, *The Unfrozen Moment*, soon after his appointment as environment secretary.

Gove described his approach by quoting Byron: “to love not man the less but nature more”. But he understands that the ‘unfrozen moment’, although he may describe it poetically, is about hard-nosed economics. “Leaving the European Union means leaving the Common Agricultural Policy, leaving the Common Fisheries Policy, and taking back control of environmental policy,” he said, “and in this unfrozen moment new possibilities occur.”

Yet the majority of the policy proposals put forward for what should replace the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) after Brexit have been, to continue the metaphor, only half-defrosted. They have not engaged with the huge opportunity which leaving CAP offers, to break away from a narrow ‘agricultural’ policy, and to create an effective rural policy, integrating forestry, renewable energy, tourism and leisure, and the other uses of the land, along with farming.

This is Confor’s proposal, set out in its new policy discussion paper *A Common Countryside Policy*.

We do not believe that economic, environmental and social development of the countryside are an ‘either – or’. It is possible to create a rural policy which will support profitable businesses, sustain vibrant rural communities, and reverse the centuries of damage which have been done to our environment – but only by ensuring that forestry plays a fully integrated role.

We may live on food – but we live in wood. It is the only large-scale renewable material we can produce to build and furnish our houses, to capture

and store carbon economically, and to replace the plastic and fossil fuels which pollute our oceans and skies.

Moreover, the growing of timber can be combined effectively with agriculture, and with habitat and landscape restoration to multiply benefits to productivity, people and the environment. Hill sheep are warmer, and free-range chickens less stressed, in the shelter of trees, raising both welfare standards and productivity. Crops grow better, and soil and water quality is higher in a partially wooded arable landscape. Trees create opportunities for new businesses: mountain biking, woodland chalets, truffle-growing, game-stalking.

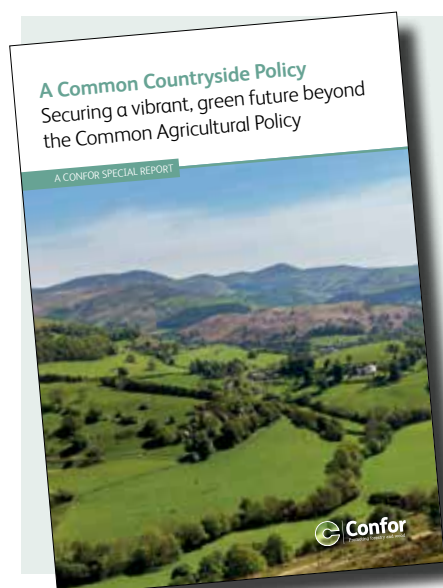
Disintegration doesn’t add up

But unless these trees are a productive crop in themselves, producing firewood, roundwood, and eventually quality sawlogs, they will not be delivering the economic benefits required for a UK rural policy after Brexit.

Forestry creates profit and sustains jobs: £2 billion and 80,000 jobs for the UK economy, according to Forestry Commission figures. While there are grants for new woodland creation, necessary to enable it to compete against subsidised farming, there is no ongoing subsidy for established forestry.

In contrast, before subsidy, farms on average run at a loss of £5500 in England and £25,000 in Scotland, while in Wales 56% of farms run at a loss. Meanwhile, environmental work is expected to be funded entirely from the public purse. After Brexit, the £650 million funding this ‘business as usual’ in our countryside will come under severe pressure.

The rural sector needs trees, because out of the profits of forestry comes the funding to pay for environmental benefits, and to secure and invest in traditional rural ways of life such as hill farming. The ‘disintegrated’ rural policy created by CAP is bad for forestry – but it is a disaster for farming.



## An opportunity we must not miss

Change brings uncertainty, but also opportunity. Brexit provides a vital opportunity to rethink rural policy to be inclusive and based on the principles of sustainability, creating more social and environmental benefits as the countryside grows economically.

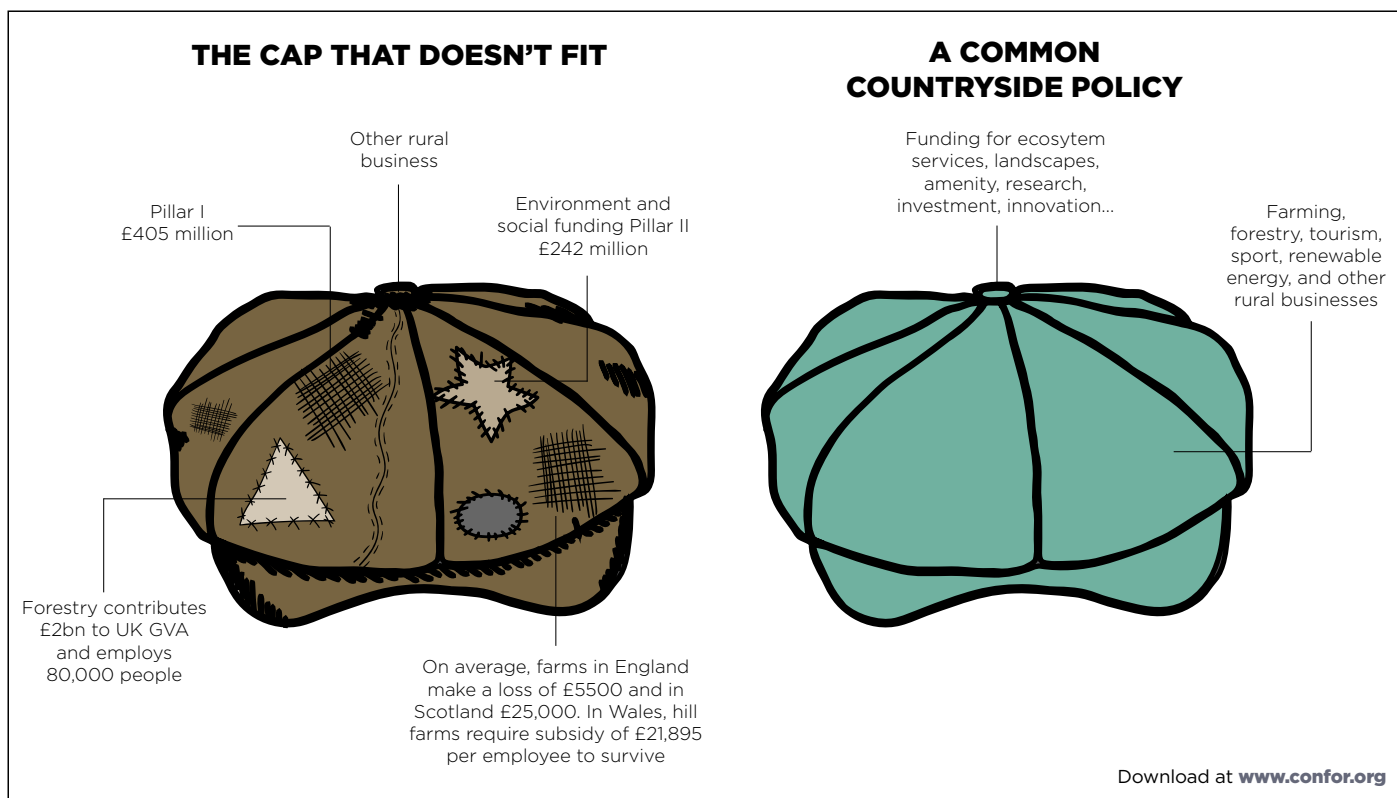
A Common Countryside Policy would offer the opportunity to throw off the straightjacket of CAP and build a sustainable rural future.

Forestry has a big part to play in that sustainable future, as many

different organisations have realised. The Soil Association has listed bringing trees onto farms as its top ‘game-changer’ in post-Brexit land-use policy.

As the UK leaves the EU, we can map the way to a better countryside – one that is greener and more productive, offering better livelihoods. We can leave the CAP and create a CCP – a Common Countryside Policy – that truly works for all. It is an opportunity we must not miss.

*Taken from the Confor Special Report*



## Defrosting rural policy

Michael Gove's 'unfrozen moment' reminds me of the words of another Michael, the comic lyricist Michael Flanders, who joked of his musical partner: 'Architecture, said Hegel, is frozen music; and Donald Swann's music has often been compared to defrosted architecture'.

It was actually Goethe who said it, not Hegel – but it was the kind of Romantic but pertinent insight that Gove was clearly aiming for in his speech. However, the phrase that came into my head was, 'agriculture, said Gove, has frozen Europe; and forestry could be the key to defrosting agriculture'. As anyone who has walked along the edge of a forest on a winter's day, and seen cattle huddle in the unfrosted strip in the shelter of the trees, this can sometimes be literally true.

But it's also an important metaphor, because if we get the policy framework right, the economic vibrancy and strong sustainability framework of forestry will not just be free to 'get away' like a successfully established tree. It will also, like the mycorrhizal relationship between different plants in a forest, nurse up other sectors of the rural economy, at present starved of investment and environmentally degraded.

To change the metaphor, as we have said in our report, the CAP doesn't fit. Let's seize the opportunity to create a new Common Countryside Policy that works for everybody, and for the environment.

## RESOURCES



Download the report at  
[www.confor.org](http://www.confor.org)

## Join our Common Countryside Policy launch in Westminster

The Common Countryside Policy paper will form the basis for discussion at the latest of Confor's Westminster conferences.

Dr Thérèse Coffey, the minister with responsibility for forestry, will open the event at RICS, Great George Street, just off Parliament Square on **29 November**.

She will be followed by a debate on "What Does a Common Countryside Policy Mean to You"? with five diverse speakers outlining their broad position before a discussion on areas where there is potential consensus – and on the challenges which remain. The five speakers are:

- **Will Ashley-Cantello**, Chief Adviser on Forests, WWF-UK
- **Minette Batters**, Deputy President, National Farmers' Union'
- **Mark Tufnell**, Incoming Vice-President, CLA
- **Stuart Goodall**, Chief Executive, Confor
- **Beccy Speight**, Chief Executive, Woodland Trust

Stuart Goodall said: "As the debate about post-Brexit rural policy and funding gathers pace, it is vital that we have these open conversations about the future. We have to listen to where different groups are coming from and find areas of mutual interest – and also discuss where the real challenges remain. Confor is delighted to be able to host this important conference."

The afternoon session of the event will include individual stories from those who have grappled with rural land use challenges, followed by a political panel discussion, with all major parties represented.

Tickets are £120 plus VAT, with a one-third discount for Confor members (£80 plus VAT). Bookings can be made by calling the Confor office on 0131 240 1410 or go to [confor.org.uk/resources/events](http://confor.org.uk/resources/events)

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