

Briefing on Agriculture Bill for Second Reading debate, Wednesday 10 October 2018

Summary:

Confor's view of the Agriculture Bill

Confor is the not-for-profit organisation for sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses in the UK. We have more than 1,500 member companies representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain. Confor focuses on the strategic issues that are vital to the success and sustainable future of the sector. These include helping to build the market for wood and forest products, creating a supportive policy environment and helping members to become more competitive and successful.

A flourishing forestry and wood processing sector is more important than ever when the UK leaves the European Union next March. The sector currently supports around 80,000 jobs and is worth £2 billion to the UK economy every year.

Confor welcomes provisions in the Secretary of State's new financial assistance powers, laid out in the enabling Bill, to support managing land in a way that protects and improves the environment.

Importantly, the bill empowers the Secretary of State to give financial assistance for the purpose of starting or improving the productivity of forestry activity. Once this country leaves the EU, this provision will be the basis for Forestry Commission England continuing to support woodland creation and management in future.

As forestry is a long-term activity, this reassurance is both necessary and welcome. However, while provisions in the Bill about continued financial support for forestry are clear, there is less certainty in other parts of the bill dealing with functions DEFRA will take on after Brexit. These are covered later in this document.

Confor's 10-point plan on how DEFRA can support forestry to help deliver a Green Brexit is set out at the end of this document.

We urge MPs to support this Bill so forestry and wood processing has certainty for the future after Brexit and the sector can continue to thrive after the UK leaves the EU.

Continued support for forestry after Brexit

Confor welcomes the Government's aim to focus rural support after Brexit on 'public money for public goods'.

The Government intends its key delivery mechanism to be a new Environmental Land Management scheme (ELM). Confor understands DEFRA is considering delivering ELM support through a mechanism similar to the present framework for forestry. This is

based on the UK Forestry Standard (which lays out a regulatory baseline and good practice guidance) and long-term management plans.

Confor welcomes the recognition of the good practice developed in forestry between the public and private sector over recent years.

Confor's issues for further consideration

There are a number of areas where the Bill introduces the possibility of assistance from government. However as currently drafted, these are limited to agriculture rather than including forestry. These are:

- Improved data collection and statistical information (Part 3);
- Government support in the event of 'exceptional market conditions' (Part 4);
- Provision about marketing standards for English produce (Part 5); and
- Government recognition of producer organisations (Part 6); and
- WTO Agreement on Agriculture (Part 7).

Confor welcomes the inclusion of timber alongside food as a product which land managers may supply, but notes that in many other sections of the Bill, food is treated as if it is the only product of the land. The countryside produces a huge range of materials society needs. It is vital that producing timber is given parity with other publicly-funded schemes for farmers and landowners.

Confor is concerned that while forestry is included in business productivity support in the Bill (1.1.2), DEFRA's policy statement published by the Agriculture Consultation team (to be read alongside the Bill) does not include forestry when describing how the Agriculture Bill can help the government achieve its ambition for the future of food, farming and the environment.

The policy statement says: "For example, this could include supporting investment in technologies and methods that can help farmers to reduce the use of inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides" (p.4) and "We want an effective innovation system that drives up sustainability in agriculture" (p.11). This kind of support should also be available to foresters, for example to support industry efforts towards integrated pest and disease management, tree breeding, mapping and production forecasting.

The same policy statement outlines support for new entrants to farming and links this to helping local authorities who want to invest in Council Farms. Confor argues that DEFRA should not limit its thinking on this area to farming and there could be opportunities to use Council Farms for community forests for carbon, and other uses to benefit communities.

10 ways DEFRA can support forestry to help deliver a Green Brexit

1. **An integrated land-use policy:** any funding available to farming must be available to forestry; and there must be regulatory alignment between farming and forestry;
2. **Level playing field:** One sector should not be funded to deliver a public benefit which another land use is expected to deliver for free. A tonne of carbon, or habitat enhancement, should have the same value across all sectors;
3. **Grasp the climate change challenge:** DEFRA should ask the Committee on Climate Change for specific recommendations to guide their planting targets, as the Scottish and Welsh Governments have done already - and embrace forestry as “a simple, low-cost option” to tackle climate change.
4. **Clear and ambitious targets to drive woodland creation:** The Scottish Government has committed to planting 15,000 hectares of new forestry each year by the middle of the next decade. England could and should match this;
5. **Information, advice and guidance:** Support should be given (advice, training and economic resilience grants where necessary) to help farmers diversify into forestry by planting timber on their land, especially where farm profitability is marginal.
6. **Long-term funding plan:** we need a funding plan that, as far as possible, is planned for the whole period of the 25 Year Environment Plan. The long timescales of forestry mean it has been disadvantaged by the short timescales of CAP funding and chopping and changing of policies. This will also be true for farmers who wish to build up their provision of public goods over several years or decades;
7. **Better reporting:** Reporting and information must treat forestry and timber production on an equal basis with farming and farm produce. Confor highlighted the Government failure to do this in our response to *Health and Harmony*.
8. **Targeted grants for woodland management as well as woodland creation.** For example, support is needed to bring native woodland into management for locally-produced sustainable firewood;
9. **UK wide policy appraisals:** Policy proposals in other parts of the UK, where these are substantially different from those in England, should be evaluated for any impact they might have in attracting or discouraging investment (for example);
10. **Improved plant health:** The UK needs a plant health system to enhance the health of British trees, not one which replaces the current system based on EU regulations.

Further information on Confor’s views on countryside policy post-Brexit

If you require any further information, please contact Eleanor Harris, Confor Policy: eleanor@confor.org.uk / 0131 240 1410.