

Evidence on Environmental Land Management and the Agricultural Transition

EVIDENCE SUBMITTED TO THE UK PARLIAMENT EFRA COMMITTEE

Confor (www.confor.org.uk) is the not-for-profit organisation for the UK's sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses. It has 1,500 member companies, representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain.

Amongst the aims of ELMs are to deliver greater woodland expansion, more woodland in sustainable management, and increasing production of sustainable timber. The following are key points to be considered in answers to the Committee's questions:

Skills

We need a huge uptake in jobs in forestry, but just as important is an urgent upskilling of farmers, land managers and their advisers across other related professions. Past experience has shown that planting millions of trees, whether for wood production or for nature, will not be delivered if the wrong tree is planted in the wrong place for the wrong reason, and if there is a lack of proper establishment and management. Understanding of the UK Forestry Standard, and how to meet it, is crucial, and this requires both the involvement of professional foresters, and the upskilling of farmers and land managers.

Advice

Advice and support in agricultural transition and ELM is crucial. Farmers need advice tailored to their land and their management objectives to be able to capitalise on the benefits trees and woodland can offer. Shifting away from current practices, for example in which forestry and farming are considered separate activities, will require culture change and farmers will need practical support to transition. Financial incentive alone will not deliver without advice and support.

Support must be suitable for farm businesses, delivered by farm advisors who use terminology familiar to farmers. There is a danger in relying on a market-based advice model: the role of the public sector and the implications for the sector of different delivery mechanisms must be understood.

Engagement

Engaging farmers and landowners, for example through the Future Farming and Countryside Programme is where the cultural and technological changes will be driven. However, initiatives like these are not drawing in the tree, woodland, forestry, and timber-growing expertise it needs. Woodland creation and agroforestry need to be presented as an opportunity for farmers to diversify and build resilient business models, and this requires an understanding of forestry business planning and economics as well as silviculture and woodland management.

Engagement and communications from Defra must include forestry and woodland as a separate topic to communicate the urgent messages required to meet tree targets.

Coherence

Clarity must be provided on how ELM and Nature for Climate Fund will dovetail to encourage uptake. This must be explicit at both a strategic and a practical level. Verbal assurance that no one will be disadvantaged for planting trees now is not enough to reassure landowners who are hesitating to apply for tree planting grants.

Relationships also need to be clarified with other strategic priorities such as Tree Health and Nature Recovery Networks. Departments and teams must work together closely as there is a danger of competing priorities, for example between the England Tree Planting Programme and ELM, when they should be delivery mechanisms/ enablers for each other. It is crucial this is got right before the detail of each is developed.

It must also be clear how the components of ELM will work together: what will be the impact of restricted eligibility and what will be the implications for subsequent components of the new scheme?