

Food & Farming

Consultation on agricultural tenancy reform planned

Defra intends to consult on proposed changes to tenancy law which would affect Agricultural Holdings Act and Farm Business Tenancies. This would be the first action since the Tenancy Reform Industry Group made a series of recommendations to government in November 2017. Whilst he did not describe the plans in detail, Farming Minister George Eustice told the Public Bills Committee that “Probably chief among the proposals was the idea that an Agricultural Holdings Act tenancy could be assignable, so that an older farmer who wanted to retire but did not have children to inherit the tenancy would have some kind of right to assign the tenancy at open market values to a third party or, indeed, to enter into surrender negotiations on the tenancy with their landlord on that basis”. He also mentioned amending Agricultural Holdings Act tenancies to allow more flexible farming practices and altering article 31 of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 so that landowners can issue tenancies without needing permission from their lender. Officials from Defra and the Welsh Government are discussing whether the consultation should also apply to Wales. A call for evidence on the repossession of agricultural land is also being considered; this could introduce the requirement for lenders to obtain a possession order from court before they can repossess land, giving landowners similar protection to homeowners.

How effective is banning pesticides?

The outdoor use of metaldehyde slug pellets in Great Britain will be banned from the spring of 2020, the Defra Secretary Michael Gove has announced. Despite the Metaldehyde Stewardship Group encouraging responsible use, the decision has been based upon advice from the UK Expert Committee on Pesticides and the Health and Safety Executive that metaldehyde poses an unacceptable risk to birds and mammals. Sales of the product will be permitted for another six months as a means of phasing out the usage of the chemical over 18 months. An alternative product, ferric phosphate, is available to growers but it is more expensive.

The news comes as Farming Minister George Eustice admitted a recent ban on neonicotinoids has increased overall pesticide use. Farming groups had warned that the ban would increase applications and the use of broad-spectrum insecticides. Research by Royal Holloway University has shown that one group of alternatives, sulfoximines, affect bee colonies. In future Mr Eustice would prefer to see a greater focus on Integrated Pest Management as proposed in the 25-Year Environment Plan.

First no-kill eggs go on sale

A breakthrough that allows scientists to easily determine a chick's sex before it hatches has the potential to end the global culling of up to six billion male chicks a year. The “Seleggt” technique determines the sex of the chick nine days into the incubation process, allowing male eggs to be processed into animal feed. An automated process mixes a chemical marker with fluid from a fertilised egg; a colour change indicates sex with a 98.5% accuracy rate. The first eggs laid by “Seleggt” hens are now on sale in Berlin with a wider roll out across Germany planned by the Rewe Group in the year ahead.

Policy

Defra Secretary at the Oxford Farming Conference

Michael Gove has claimed that the world is “on the verge of another revolution in how we produce food”, for which Britain can be “the vanguard nation”. According to Mr Gove, technological advances like robotics and big data will permit more precise and sensitive cultivation of produce while reducing the need for labour and natural resources. He acknowledged that there are challenges including the financial accessibility of new technology and what he called the “ethical and economic questions about gene-editing”.

Overall it was an optimistic and ambitious conference address but lacked new information. Mr Gove reemphasised his views on food quality and welfare; we need to “maintain our own resilience and reputation for quality” and “not barter them away in pursuit of a necessarily short-term trade-off” suggesting disagreements with Liam Fox over chlorinated chicken and hormone treated beef will be back. He is clearly placing great significance upon the Government's forthcoming food strategy, calling it ambitious and radical, “challenging lazy orthodoxies” and looking at the bigger picture of diet, health and lifestyle.

He warned against a no-deal Brexit once again, claiming “effective tariffs on beef and sheep meat would be above 40%” if an agreement with Europe could not be reached. Despite the potential challenges, Mr Gove insisted that Brexit would allow Britain to “escape from the bureaucratic straitjacket of the CAP and develop a more vibrant farming sector”.

Farm Regulation Review

Dame Glenys Stacey’s [Farm Inspection and Regulation Review](#) has recommended significant organisational changes to Defra and the Defra group in order to create an inspection and regulatory system which is more seamless for farmers and land managers. A new independent regulator for farming and land management is proposed which would have its own field force and unite the regulatory responsibilities currently exercised by Defra’s agencies and local authorities.

Scotland: LFA payments to continue until 2020

Scotland will be the only part of the UK to maintain payments under the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) into 2020. Payments will be reduced to 80% of their current level in 2019 and 2020. Rural Economy Secretary Fergus Ewing accepted that the reductions were “not ideal” but unavoidable due to the new EU regulations. The change will not affect those who receive the minimum payment of £385.

Environment & Natural Capital

Clean Air Strategy 2019 launched by government

A ‘world leading’ [strategy](#) to combat air pollution has been unveiled by the Government with the Defra Secretary Michael Gove saying we all have a role in “reducing emissions and cleaning up our air to protect our health”. Actions to reduce emissions from farming continue to focus upon ammonia emitted from manures and inorganic fertilisers but it also notes how methane and other compounds contribute to the formation of low level ozone that can harm both health and yields. In addition to providing a national [code of good agricultural practice](#), several further targets have been set out including: the extension of environmental permitting to the beef and dairy sectors; requiring the adoption of low emission farming techniques; and regulation to minimise pollution from fertiliser use. Householders using solid fuel heating will be affected too; the most polluting fuels will be banned and by 2022 only the cleanest stoves will be available for sale.

Opinions sought on protecting England’s trees

Local authorities will be required to consult local residents on the felling of trees in urban areas if proposals made by Defra become law. To strengthen the protection of all wooded landscapes, the Forestry Commission would also gain new and improved powers to stop illegal felling and to force replanting. The [consultation](#) will be accepting submissions until 28 February.

Waste and Resources Strategy

Defra has unveiled an ambitious [waste and resources strategy](#) that seeks to preserve resources by promoting efficiency, reducing waste and moving towards a circular economy in England. The plan includes invoking the “polluter pays” principle and extending responsibility for packaging so that producers pay the cost of disposal. Ben Elliot, co-founder of lifestyle group Quintessentially, has been appointed Food Surplus and Waste Champion and will be working towards eliminating landfilled food waste by 2030. 10.2 million tonnes of food is currently wasted each year.

Shortly before Christmas, the Government also published draft clauses for the Environment Bill alongside a [policy paper](#) setting out a broad vision for the UK’s environment when we leave the EU. Some stakeholders will be pleased to learn that the 25 Year Environment Plan will be placed on a statutory footing, although the draft clauses primarily apply to England alone. The Government will be legally required to maintain a plan for improving the environment, provide an annual update to Parliament and review it every five years.

Natural Assets North

Natural Assets North is a new project by IPPR North which will investigate the natural potential of the north of England. Sponsored by government agencies and utilities, its first [briefing](#) explores the importance of the uplands. It argues that the North’s natural assets often lack a ‘seat at the table’ in decisions taken about planning and the economy within combined authorities and organisations such as Transport for the North. A strategic joined up vision for the future of the uplands needs to be created because there isn’t a mainstream policy narrative which articulates environmental opportunities and challenges, and their relationship with the health of the economy and people of the North.

Property & Development

Quayside public access ruling

Registration of an Essex quayside as a town or village green (TVG) has been upheld following a decision by the Court of Appeal. The concrete apron had previously been used for dog walking and crabbing before being sealed off by the owners of the Port of Mistley in 2008. The Court felt the coexistence of commercial and recreational uses prior to registration of the area as a TVG demonstrated both uses might continue alongside one another post-registration. Registration of land as a TVG is permitted following public use for at least 20 years without the express consent of the landowner and significantly restricts future development. If you would like advice in relation to town and village greens legislation please contact [Peter Grubb](#).

New law to improve tenant safety

New regulations under the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 intend to improve standards for tenants in both private and social rented property. The new Act gives local authorities the power to impose banning orders and fines of up to £30,000 on landlords of properties which are not fit for human habitation. Minister for Housing and Homelessness, Heather Wheeler, said, “this new law is a further step to ensure that tenants have the decent homes they deserve”.

England: Better Broadband Scheme extended

The Better Broadband Scheme has been extended until the end of 2019. Anyone who is unable to get download speeds of at least two mbps and will not gain access to superfast broadband within the next 12 months, could benefit. So far, more than 20,000 satellite, 4G and fixed wireless connections have been supported. The scheme subsidises the installation and hardware costs of eligible households and businesses to ensure they pay no more than £400 in first year costs.

Business & Economy

Japan to lift ban on UK red meat products

A BSE era ban imposed by Japan on UK beef and lamb has been lifted, opening the market up to an expected £127 million of beef and lamb exports over the next five years. The announcement came ahead of Theresa May’s meeting with Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which Mrs May hoped would “enhance cooperation in a wide range of areas” in the face of Brexit.

Renewable energy: Feed-in Tariff to close

The Government is to close the Feed-in Tariff scheme from 31 March 2019. Crucially, following the closure of the FIT scheme, there will be no way for new small scale generators to be paid for the export of energy to the grid. The Government has recognised this is unreasonable and it is [consulting](#) on a scheme to pay small scale generators for their exported energy. It is likely, for those who can use the energy onsite, Solar PV will remain a popular technology after the end of the FIT, but having a mechanism to be paid for any exported surplus energy will be important to ensure projects remain viable. If you would like to discuss existing or potential projects, please contact [Henry Grant](#) or [Henry Brown](#).

Thinking of exporting?

Businesses can apply for a grant of up to £2,500 to attend an international trade show such as the China Dairy Exhibition, Summer Fancy Food in New York or GreenTech Amsterdam. The Department for International Trade’s Tradeshaw Access Programme grant can be used to pay direct exhibiting costs. A business can apply for up to six grants.

Other Rural News

Experts demand action on chemicals in processed meats

Health experts have warned that the processed meat industry faces a reputation equivalent to that of big tobacco unless it removes carcinogenic chemicals from some of its products. In a joint statement with politicians, the experts claim a consensus of scientific opinion that nitrites, a chemical which is used to cure bacon and ham while giving a distinctive pink colour, lead to cancer. Dr Aseem Malhotra, a cardiologist leading the call to action said, “the meat industry must act fast, act now – or be condemned to a similar reputational blow to that dealt to tobacco”. The CEO of the British Meat Processors Association defended their use to avoid potential food poisoning issues saying, “you don’t just blindly do away with those”.

And finally... The art of food

London's Victoria and Albert Museum houses a collection of 2.27 million objects from around the world including a unicorn tapestry and a mechanical tiger. However from May 2019, the V&A will explore every stage of the food system – from compost to table – as part of its "FOOD: Bigger than the Plate" exhibition. Exploring issues from vertical farming to gastronomic experiments, the event hopes to educate the public on the modern food world that exists beyond their plates. Tickets to go on sale early 2019.

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