



NORTH EAST SCOTLAND AGRICULTURE ADVISORY GROUP BULLETIN – 25 NOVEMBER 2020

UK AGRICULTURE BILL

1 Recommendation

1.1 It is recommended that the Group notes this report

2 Discussion

2.1 The UK Agriculture Bill passed into UK law on 11 November 2020. It sets out the basis upon which farmers and land managers in England can obtain financial support from the public purse, primarily through the provision of non-market “public goods” including enhanced air and water quality, biodiversity and soil health. Measures to address climate change and mitigate flooding will also attract support under the Environmental Land Management scheme. The new legislation will feature a seven-year transition period to enable the land-based sector in England to migrate away from the ‘poorly targeted’ EU Basic Payment Scheme subsidy system, which drew criticism by benefitting larger landowners while under-rewarding farmers who provide specific public benefits.

2.2 The new Bill has also drawn criticism, particularly in relation to whether agricultural and food products imported in future into the UK under new trade deals will comply with current domestic standards. Late concessions were obtained on parliamentary scrutiny of new trade deals and also on the continuation and strengthening of the Trade and Agriculture Commission, an independent advisory board to UK Government comprising farming, retail and consumer interests. Set up in July 2020, the Commission was originally intended to operate only for six months, but it will now enjoy a longer-term and more active role. Additional parliamentary scrutiny will centre on whether “commitments in new free trade agreements relating to agricultural goods are consistent with maintaining UK levels of statutory protection in relation to human, animal and plant life and health, animal welfare and environmental protection”.

2.3 Whilst the above concessions have been welcomed by farming and consumer interests, concerns remain in some quarters. Sean Rickard, Independent Economic Analyst, has stated that future Free Trade Agreements negotiated by the UK will increasingly expose UK farming to low-cost global competition, resulting in the contraction of the domestic agri-food sector, unless drastic action is taken to bolster competitiveness, productivity, sustainability and quality standards (eg animal welfare and staff working conditions).

His view is that the new Bill overlooks the need to build an internationally competitive food sector built on distinctive, value-added products with credible and demonstrable attributes (provenance, safety, sustainability and welfare), with transparent, trusting and cooperative supply chain relationships which embrace ‘sustainable intensification’ (incorporating agri-biotechnology and

precision farming) – and critically – that government policy must recognise that farming is becoming a digital high-tech industry and will require people with new skills and knowledge for the sector to flourish. Otherwise, he suggests, the Bill is nothing more than a land management policy designed to support a shrinking food industry.

- 2.4 Notwithstanding unforeseen implications from the UK Internal Market Bill which is still making its way through the parliamentary process, agricultural policy in Scotland will continue to be devolved to Scottish Government.

International trade, which will surely have a huge, long-term impact on the future of agriculture and food production in Scotland, is a reserved matter. The current and ongoing call on public funds to address the CV-19 pandemic in the UK is likely to deplete future levels of farm support, heightening the importance of international trade as a key driver for UK agriculture and food production, particularly after it finds itself as a Third Country supplier on the outside of the EU's famously high tariff barriers.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 The table below sets out whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial		x	
Staffing		x	
Equalities		x	
Fairer Scotland Duty		x	
Town Centre First		x	
Sustainability		x	
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		x	

- 5.3 An equality impact assessment is not required because the recommended actions do not have a differential impact upon people with protected characteristics.
- 5.4 No risks have been identified at Corporate or Strategic level.

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