A picture containing grass, tree, outdoor, field

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**Agricultural trends**

It’s clear there have been big changes to farming the uplands of Wales. Mixed (arable and livestock) farming – the ‘traditional’ agricultural system for centuries – has almost disappeared, including the tradition of making upland hay.  As a result, farming has become much more specialised and livestock grazing is now the main land use in the Welsh uplands. The numbers of livestock, especially sheep, are at an extremely high level when considered in historic terms. From 1867 it took nearly a century for sheep numbers to double from 2.5 to 5 million.  It took less than 30 years, from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s, for numbers to double again to 10 million; about 90% of these sheep are in the uplands.

What is the future of farming in Wales & are the Welsh Government creating the right policies to enhance a better future for farming?

**Economic trends**

Average farm incomes remain heavily dependent on direct income support and despite the huge investment of public money there is a continuing rise in obsolete holdings, even though nearly 7,000 were removed from the records in 2014. While businesses fail for all sorts of reasons, this number of ‘lost’ holdings in a heavily supported industry must surely be a sign of that support’s failure. Relatedly, farming employment opportunities continue to decline and there have been more part time than full time farmers since the early 2000s.

The contribution of upland agriculture to the Welsh economy is difficult to assess, but store cattle and lambs are the main outputs, the value of these stock being £111 million or just under 8% of Welsh agriculture’s input into the economy.

**Environmental trends**

There is growing evidence that shows the natural resources on which we depend (including soil, water, and air), habitat condition and species numbers, are in poor conditions and declining. [Human action, like unsustainable farming, is heavily implicated](https://naturalresources.wales/evidence-and-data/research-and-reports/the-state-of-natural-resources-report-assessment-of-the-sustainable-management-of-natural-resources/?lang=en). Recent biodiversity reports, including the [State of Nature 2016](https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/downloads/documents/conservation-projects/state-of-nature/state-of-nature-uk-report-2016.pdf) and the [State of Birds in Wales 2018](https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/wales/b/wales-blog/posts/state-of-birds-in-wales-revealed-1534421348), highlight alarming declines in farmland wildlife. These are often associated with the loss of mixed farming, and many upland species such as curlew, golden plover and black grouse have not fared well. Whilst there are many examples of good nature friendly farming, the evidence indicates that these are far from the norm.

A sign on a cart

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Changes have to be made in order to continue farming in Wales!

**The case for change**

It’s evident that the current approach to upland farming as driven by the CAP isn’t doing enough to protect the environment, keep farm businesses viable, or farmers on the land. Holdings continue to become obsolete, and a growing number of farmers are having to find other work.

However, Wales’ uplands offer the potential to provide many environmental and public goods and services. These include ecosystem services like carbon and water storage, food and fibre production and tourism. But, because current policies mainly focus on food production, they do very little to promote and reward agriculture that protects and maintains the environment for the public’s benefit. Moreover, existing policies do not give farmers and other land managers enough help to gain access to other, significant income streams based on wider ‘environmental’ economies.

**80% of land is given over to some form of farming**

**A return to the economy of Wales needs to be better than 1% of GDP**



The future

Leaving the EU presents Wales with a unique opportunity to develop new policies and practises that will help restore and maintain farming, rural communities, and nature. Based on the evidence presented in [*Farming, the environment and the Welsh uplands*](https://community.rspb.org.uk/getinvolved/wales/b/wales-blog/posts/new-report-calls-for-a-balance-between-farming-and-nature-1388528050)*,* future support should encourage farming that is appropriate to the sustainable potential of the land. This includes suitable stocking levels and the restoration and maintenance of habitats. Pre-1960’s stocking levels, i.e., before farmers were paid for the number of cows and sheep they had, might be a good starting point in establishing what *sustainable stocking* looks like. The report highlights the following key areas for the future investment of public money to help establish sustainable farming and land management:

* supporting High Nature Value farming and agroecological practices i.e., the application of ecological processes to food production e.g., organic farming,
* the efficient production and marketing of ‘nature-friendly’ products,
* developing payment for ecosystem services schemes and
* land sparing activities such as woodland creation.

How achievable this depends on some big Brexit decisions including what kind of trade deal we get and how much money will be made available to support farmers and other land managers.