

TRANSITION

Securing a sustainable future for your farm business



FIELD OF DREAMS

How to get back on track after a nightmare season

How to bounce back after challenging season



Welcome to *Transition* – the quarterly supplement from *Farmers Weekly* to help secure a sustainable future for your farm business.

This issue is all about bouncing back after a challenging season. With harvest under way, our cover story looks at ways to get your farm back on track this autumn – including some practical hints and tips for growers. We kick off though with the results of our annual *Transition* survey, which shows more farmers are keen to maintain incomes following the switch away from direct support payments.

Following an extremely wet six months, we also look at the importance of making farm businesses more resilient and adaptable to increasingly unpredictable weather and the challenge of climate change. Whether it is a disease outbreak, a farm fire or an unexpected staff absence, a business continuity plan will ensure you are best-placed to cope with a crisis.

Finally, we would like to thank the hundreds of you who came to our inaugural *Transition* Live event in May. We have a special report on p24-25 and plans are already under way for a similar event next year.

As always, we are grateful to everyone who has taken the time to share their stories with us as they strive to secure a sustainable future for their businesses – including our *Transition* Farmers, who are working to embrace positive change.

We are equally grateful to our *Transition* Partners for sharing their expertise and advice along the way. For more about our *Transition* initiative, visit our knowledge hub at fwi.co.uk/transition.

Johann Tasker, *Transition* editor

OUR PARTNERS

The *Farmers Weekly* *Transition* Partner Network is a UK-wide community of farmers, industry stakeholders and influencers working together to secure a sustainable future for UK agriculture. If you would like to join and want more information, contact Anna Eccleston at anna.eccleston@markallengroup.com



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Meet our Transition Farmers

These 16 farmers are sharing their journeys with us as they adapt their businesses

Karen Halton
Cheshire



Farm size 240ha

Enterprises
530-cow dairy herd

Transition goals

- Recruit/retain staff
- Maintain animal health and welfare
- Increase direct sales

James MacCartney
Rutland



Farm size 162ha

Enterprises
Beef and sheep

Transition goals

- Reduce disease in sheep
- Be better than net zero
- Establish herbal leys

Vaughan Hodgson P18
Cumbria



Farm size 244ha

Enterprises
Cereals, grassland, broilers

Transition goals

- Support the next generation
- Replace lost Basic Payment Scheme income
- Adapt to uncertain weather

Alan Steven P8
Fife



Farm size 138ha

Enterprises
Potatoes, brussels sprouts, parsnips, malting barley

Transition goals

- Reduce cultivations
- Improve soil health
- More resilient rotations

Andrew McFadzean P23
Ayrshire



Farm size 285ha

Enterprises
350 beef cattle, wheat, beans, barley, fodder beet

Transition goals

- Slash finishing time
- Reduce dependence on inputs using solar energy
- Improve grassland

Rachel & Richard Risdon P6
Devon



Farm size 161ha

Enterprises
300-cow dairy herd

Transition goals

- Secure adequate labour
- Better understanding of Environmental Land Management
- Reduce carbon footprint

Kit Speakman
Essex



Farm size 275ha

Enterprises
Mixed arable, beef and sheep

Transition goals

- Bridge income gap
- Fully diversified business
- Widen the rotation

Eddie Andrew
Sheffield



Farm size 73ha

Enterprises
Dairy, milk delivery service, ice cream parlour and farm shop

Transition goals

- Co-operating to reduce costs
- Establish a new dairy
- Reduce carbon footprint

Irwel Jones P18
Carmarthenshire



Farm size 375ha

Enterprises
1,500 ewes on owned and rented land, suckler cows and followers, root crops

Transition goals

- Manage natural woodland
- Plant hedgerows
- Rely less on volatile inputs

Andy Bason P23
Hampshire



Farm size 800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, spring beans, oats, linseed and oilseed rape

Transition goals

- Cut carbon emissions by 30%
- Establish 10ha of agroforestry
- Establish 10ha of woodland

Duncan Blyth P11
Norfolk



Farm size 2,650ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, sugar beet, pulses, grassland, woodland, wetlands

Transition goals

- Improve soil health
- Develop natural capital revenues
- Achieve net zero by 2030

Fergal Watson
County Down



Farm size 285ha across three units

Enterprises
170-cow suckler herd, beans, wheat, spring barley, oats

Transition goals

- Recruit/retain farm staff
- Restructure suckler herd
- Improve business resilience

Philip Vickers
County Durham



Farm size 1,250ha

Enterprises
Winter wheat, oilseed rape, spring barley, spring beans, lupins, rotational grass; share-farming agreement with tenant sheep farmer

Transition goals

- Maintain margins while changing approach
- Improve soil health and resilience
- Enhance natural environment

Kate and Vicky Morgan
East Yorkshire



Farm size 1,700 breeding sows

Enterprises
Weaning 1,000 pigs a week – finished on-site and through B&B arrangements with local farmers, 140ha rented out

Transition goals

- Facilitate structural change in supply chain
- Establish more influence over own destiny
- Diversify

Ed Shuldham
Wiltshire



Farm size 1,800ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, oats, forage and grain maize, peas, solar, biomass, anaerobic digestion, events and property diversifications

Transition goals

- Help shape Sustainable Farming Incentive through participation in pilot
- Make more use of data
- Take natural capital

Matthew Williams
Shropshire



Farm size 1,100ha

Enterprises
Cereals, oilseed rape, winter beans

Transition goals

- Improve profitability and margins
- Continue to improve soil health
- Control and optimise input use



Faster progress needed on Transition, reveals survey

Farmers striving for a more sustainable future need a clear vision for agriculture from the new government. **Jonathan Riley** reports

The fourth annual *Farmers Weekly* Transition survey – carried out by Macleod Research – provides a detailed picture of UK farming as it transitions from farm support payments to alternative funding streams, post-Brexit.

More than 600 farmers from all types and sizes of farm business took part during spring 2024 and aired their views on issues such as costs, productivity, policy, viability and government support schemes.

Basic payments

Although direct support in England will end completely in less than three years, farmers still continue to rely heavily on Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) money. More than nine out of 10 farmers (91%) received some funding in the 12 months from May 2023 – a statistic unchanged from year-earlier results.

On average, BPS support still accounts for more than a quarter (27.8%) of UK farm income. In Scotland and Wales, where farm policy changes are being made at a slower rate, almost one-third of income – 32% in Scotland and 31% in Wales – is still through government support.

For a small proportion of all UK farms (6%), BPS made up three-quarters or more of their total revenue. However, the general picture for England shows the value of payouts is declining in line with government policy. This is clearly represented by the growing proportion of farmers slipping down into the lowest bracket of subsidy cheque values. In 2024, the survey shows two-thirds of farms (65%) earned between £1 and £29,999. But back in 2021, at the outset of the Transition period, far fewer individuals (52%)

were in this lowest payment group.

The majority of farms (74%) categorised as livestock only fell into this category while another feature of this bracket was the number of smaller-scale farms. Almost nine out of 10 farms under 99ha were in this lowest payment level.

Numbers receiving higher value cheques in 2024 were correspondingly lower with 13% in the £30,000 to £49,999 category, and 12% earning between £50,000 and £150,000.

At the start of the Transition period in 2021, a total of 40% of farms were in these two higher payment brackets.

Averaged across all regions, farms are seeing lower payments. In England, the average annual payment has dropped to £23,204 from £26,288 in 2023, and from £51,032 in 2021. Scotland saw BPS incomes decline to £22,562 from £25,285

last year, and from £61,095 four years ago, while Welsh farmers reported their support payments were just £9,271 in the 12 months to May 2024. The figure for Wales is just two-thirds of the year-earlier level at £14,055, and only 30% of the £30,000 Welsh farmers received four years ago.

Future viability

Dwindling financial support is having an effect on farmer confidence. More than three-quarters (78%) remain either “fairly” or “very” concerned about how they will replace lost revenue from support.

The figure is broadly consistent with previous years, which show 80% held this level of concern in both 2023 and 2022, and 78% in 2021.

One in five farmers and growers could not yet tell how serious the situation would be for their >

MICHAEL LEE, DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR, HARPER ADAMS UNIVERSITY

The latest *FW* Transition survey highlights the need for faster progress which must be much quicker, says Prof Michael Lee. Although the trend is for a greater adoption of carbon benchmarking and the Sustainable Farming Incentive, this appears to be primarily driven by private incentivisation via supply chain schemes or necessity, rather than targeted, strategic, government-driven support for essential farming communities.

“I hope the new government takes notice of this data and works with the sector to provide the support needed to protect our food production base and realises that the heart of carbon capture and storage is in our countryside managed by our farmers.

The risk of not doing so will be the loss of vast swathes of our national food production capability, affecting us all in a cost-of-living crisis, and damage to our rural communities and countryside. The agricultural transition must support our farmers to develop profitable businesses where national food production is valued in-line with the ‘public good-nature’ of ensuring accessible, high-quality, nutritious food for all.”



< businesses. Only 4% said they were confident enough that they were “not at all concerned” about their future viability.

More than half (56%) forecast it would be difficult to survive, while another 25% of farmers and growers stressed that survival could only be achieved with great difficulty. Figures from concerned farmers have remained virtually unchanged since the first Transition survey report four years ago.

The proportion of farmers and growers who responded relatively optimistically to the question on future viability has increased after two lower years from 10% in 2023, and 9% in 2022, to 14% in this year’s poll. The 14% believed they could now survive fairly easily.

to 22% who are yet to begin making preparations. The question, asked across the UK, threw up some important regional differences in responses. In England, 78% of farmers have already made changes, up from 76% last year and 65% in the first annual survey.

In Scotland, where the government has pledged to continue providing support payments, 59% of farmers have put measures in place to protect their future viability. That is a marked increase from the 2023 survey, which recorded just 40% had made changes.

In Wales, responses to policy changes have been slower – there is virtually no year-on-year change, with 52% in 2024 compared with 51% in 2023.



More than eight out of 10 farm managers said their units were run efficiently

Efforts to change

The continuing high level of concern and the diminishing time period left until support payments are reduced or wiped out have seen an uptick in the number of farms that are taking action to secure their futures.

Last year, almost one-third (30%) of farmers in the UK were still to embark on the transition to life after BPS. This proportion has dropped

Strategies and efficiency

Of the farm businesses that have begun making preparations, most are investigating off-farm income (37%), boosting productivity (35%) or starting a new enterprise or diversification (34%). Farmer numbers eyeing productivity have dropped from 41% last year, and diversification from 39% in 2023.

However, there was a significant difference in

age groups, with 53% of farmers under 44 years still looking to boost productivity.

The figures further revealed that almost 60% of farms already had some form of off-farm income – a figure that is consistent with the past two years, but markedly up on 2021 when half had an off-farm income.

Looking in more detail, the income source is most likely to be an off-farm job or employment, with one in five responses (21%) saying they were employed in roles such as contracting or consulting.

There was a notable difference between age groups picked up in this sector. More than one-third (34%) of farmers who were 44 years old and below had off-farm jobs compared with just 10% of respondents aged 65 and over.

Smaller-scale farms, under 99ha, also had a higher proportion at 30% in outside work.

TRANSITION FARMERS: RICHARD AND RACHEL RISDON



Devon dairy farmers Richard and Rachel Risdon have enrolled with the Sustainable Farming Incentive and the more recent SAM3 herbal ley offering. “Enrolling seemed to be fairly easy and well paid for us,” says Rachel. “However, with the various options, we don’t enjoy having to remember what you can and can’t do in each field at any particular time of year.”

The Risdons are Arla farmers and have done the Arlagarden Climate Check – now named “FarmAhead” – for three years. “We have also used Agrecalc as part of the Leaf net-zero project that we are in, and found this fairly easy to fill in.”

They have had a brief look at carbon

schemes, but one farm consultant informed them that he didn’t believe any dairy farmer could ever be genuinely carbon neutral.

“We are doing what we can to farm efficiently – as most others are – because that improves our carbon footprint. But primarily, it’s because it improves our profitability,” says Rachel.

She says to improve their carbon status beyond this is difficult. “Even with the one-to-one advice through the Leaf net-zero project, we are struggling to go further as there is little to no financial gain, and certain options require investments that are well beyond us as tenant farmers.”

Efficiency

Despite the high level of concern over the future, more than eight out of 10 farm managers believe their units are run efficiently – a response that is broadly in-line with previous surveys – 84% in 2024 compared with 85% in 2023.

Within this overall bracket, about 68% suggested a “fairly efficient” level of production, and 16% recorded their units were running very efficiently.

Across the regions, there were stark differences. In Scotland, 97% felt their units were running efficiently – a hike on 2023 when the

TOP 10 DEMANDS FOR GOVERNMENT POLICY

- Food production and security supported
- Better information on long-term policies
- Fair prices for farm produce
- An end to cheap, poor-quality food imports
- Reinstatement of BPS
- Clarification of scheme rules
- Closer consultation with farmers
- Basic income for food producers
- Less interference with production
- Clampdown on supermarket buying power



SURVEY RESPONDENT COMMENTS

- “As a farm adviser, I can categorically say there is not enough support for farmers to help them improve their farm business during the current changes. The government are really letting down a whole industry.”
- “It’s difficult to become more sustainable when the future of farming is so uncertain.”
- “Farming incomes have been left in the dark ages. The government needs to radically change its farming policy.”
- “As a small farm, even to afford the basics – like a shed – is now impossible.”
- “Bring back direct payments to keep farmers farming, and level the competing advantage overseas farmers have with access to our markets.”
- “Farm prices should be high enough to support the food we produce and provide a standard of living equal to government minimum wages.”
- “Make a clear commitment to food security. Make supermarkets more accountable. Stop importing non-farm assured products. Stop greenwashing.”
- “Make all imports comply with our standards so we are on a level field.”

figure stood at 82%. In Wales, by contrast, just 71% suggested their units were running efficiently, which was a drop from 84% last year. It may simply be due to a lower base of responses on this question from the devolved regions, says survey analyst Heather McLeod.

Environmental measures

The number of farm businesses declaring they have not taken part in, and will not consider, carbon footprinting remains high.

Overall, two out of five farms – the same as 2023 (40%) and an increase on the 34% prior to that – suggested they would not engage in carbon assessments in the short or long term. But the number of businesses that have already carried out an assessment has risen from 14% in 2021 to 23% in this latest survey, and there is a block of 37% of farms which aim to carry out assessments sometime in the future.

The uptake in carbon footprinting varies significantly between regions, with the highest proportion in Scotland (44%), where the government-supported National Test Programme is well under way. In England (22%) and Wales (24%), far fewer have engaged.

Meanwhile, the number of farmers in carbon-capture schemes remained consistently and extremely low at 3%. Just 2% belong to a carbon credit trading scheme as a wait-and-see approach to the still developing market continues to affect engagement.

JONTY ARMITAGE, HEAD OF FARMING, STRUTT & PARKER

These results should send a strong message to the new government about a worrying lack of confidence within the farming sector, says Jonty Armitage. “It is striking, although not surprising, that only 5% are happy with their government’s long-term vision for farming. This reflects one of the main points highlighted in the *Farmers Weekly* Transition project publication *A Future for Farming*, that the government needs to paint a much clearer picture of what it believes the agricultural industry should look like moving forward.

“It is also interesting to see the range of actions that people say they are taking to prepare for life without their BPS payment.

We recognise that making marginal gains in agricultural productivity – or indeed signing up for the SFI – will only be part of the answer in filling the financial gap.

“For some farmers, there may be a need for more fundamental changes in how they run their businesses, which may involve addressing some tough questions. A fresh perspective can be invaluable in pinpointing strategic opportunities throughout this process.”



Other environmental measures appeared to be more appealing to farm businesses. Encouraging biodiversity and wildlife topped the list for engagement, with 31% already receiving some reward, and a further 52% keen to become involved.

Far fewer were involved in other measures. Only 8% were part of schemes to provide clean and plentiful water or mitigation of climate change effects.

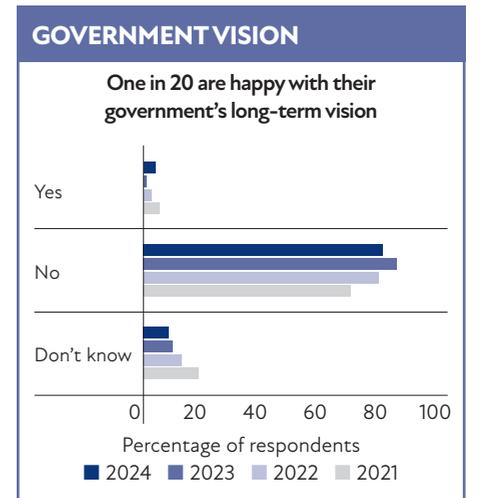
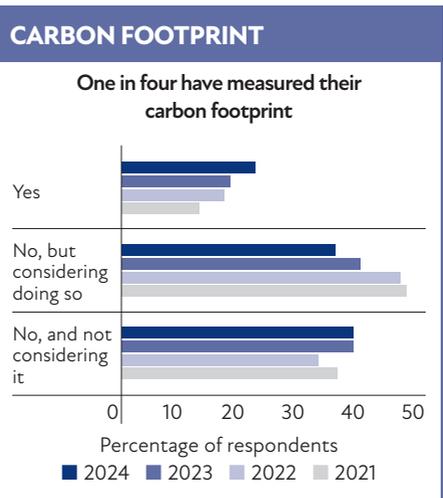
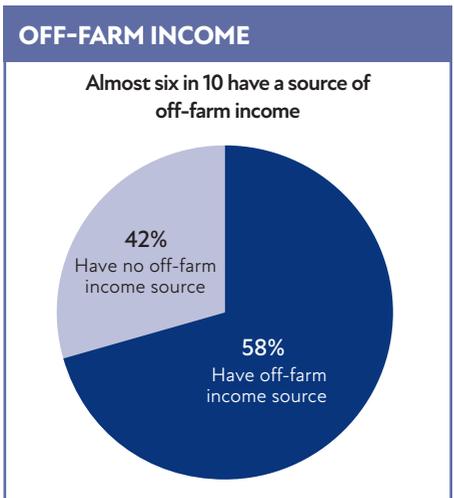
In both of these categories, however, 62% of respondents said they would like to become involved. Protection from pollution saw the

highest response from those wanting to be involved at 69%, although just 6% were carrying out work for such schemes.

Clean air was another category that was peaking interest at 64%, but, again, only a small number (2%) were so far doing the work.

In England, farmers were quizzed about government environmental support schemes as the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme was split into the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Landscape Recovery and Countryside Stewardship schemes.

Overall, there has been a sharp increase in >





Profitability was blamed as the main hurdle to sustainability

SURVEY COMMENTS

Survey analyst Heather Macleod says while more farmers are preparing for life without the Basic Payment Scheme, there remains a high level of concern about the future.

The lack of clarity on government policy and new funding streams is creating uncertainty. This is holding back many farmers, who are reluctant to sign up to carbon schemes and make large-scale change on their units.

She says where information has been better – for example, the Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme in England – farmers have shown a willingness to get involved. Others are looking to off-farm income to help.

The finding that six in 10 now have an off-farm income is surprisingly high and shows the level of concern over maintaining a profitable future from farming alone, says Heather.

< interest, measured by the declining number of farmers who said they did not want to be involved in any scheme.

In 2024, just 12% said they would not join a scheme compared with more than one-quarter (27%) a year ago. This was driven by an upsurge in interest in the SFI scheme. In 2023, farmers struggled to obtain information on how the scheme would pan out, and just 49%, down from two-thirds in 2022, wanted to be involved. However, the 2024 survey revealed this had jumped to 80% of farmers. The increase followed the government’s announcement of improved measures earlier in the year.

Attitude to government farming policy

Contentment with government policy makes grim reading for civil servants and politicians across the UK. Overall, just 5% said they were happy with their government’s long-term vision for farming. That is a marked improvement on the 2% recorded in the 2023 survey, but there were significant regional variations.

In England, the improved communication on SFI plans led to an increase in satisfaction to 6%. But Wales and Scotland produced satisfied responses from just 3% of farmers – a similar level to the 2023 survey.

The discontent was further underlined by poor responses on available information and government policy. Despite a considerable improvement on last year’s figures, where 88% of UK farmers said they lacked sufficient information to progress, three out of four still felt there was not enough concrete data to go forward with their transition plans.

The improvement was driven by England’s farmers alone, where numbers of dissatisfied farmers dropped to 71% from last year’s 87%.

Away from England, the figures spell out a dismal message for the devolved governments. In Scotland, 94% of farmers – the same percentage as last year – said they still lacked information to safeguard the future of their business.

Welsh farmers were similarly disenchanted with their government, and 93% said they had

insufficient guidance to go forward – only a slight improvement on the 2023 result, which indicated 97% were discontent.

Across the UK, it was carbon storage where government policy fell down, with 84% of farmers and growers needing more guidance. Only slightly better was air quality (73%) and cultural heritage (69%). Water quality (62%), public access and biodiversity (56%) information also drew negative responses.

Uncertainty over policy combined with the loss of the BPS meant less than half (45%) of farmers and growers believed their businesses were sustainable in the long term. That figure has changed little since last year at 43%, but is well down on the 54% recorded in the first Transition survey in 2021.

Roughly one-third of respondents were unsure about the sustainability of their farming

practices, but one-quarter (24%) believed their units were definitely being farmed unsustainably.

There was little difference across the regions, with 49% of farms in Wales farmed sustainably and 44% of farmers and growers in Scotland responding positively.

The main hurdle preventing an improvement to sustainability was poor profitability, named by 47% of farmers and growers. But this was closely followed by a lack of government support (45%) high-input costs (44%) and production costs (42%).

More than one-third (36%) blamed an uncertain future, and an identical percentage put forward low-cost food as the reason for a lack of sustainability.

Other issues cited were planning obstacles, price volatility, interest rates, imported food and climate change. ■

TRANSITION FARMER: ALAN STEVEN

In Fife, Transition farmer and arable grower Alan Steven voices his concern at the difference in approaches taken by the devolved governments.

Alan says there is no longer a level playing field for inputs such as cover crop seeds. The increased uptake of Sustainable Farming Incentive options in England means English farmers and growers have financial support and, therefore, an advantage when buying cover crop seed, he suggests. Other grants and schemes are distorting the market. Machinery prices are set UK-wide – but regional grants mean a grower in one area will be able to invest, while another is priced out of the market. He also says policymakers and buyers need to better appreciate practical factors such as changing weather when developing schemes and setting prices.

“The weather has again been the biggest player in past year. The governments seem to forget we can’t control the weather, and so we need to invest in drainage and



irrigation. Schemes that better reflect that would help,” he says.

● Follow Alan Steven, Richard and Rachel Risdon and our other Transition Farmers as they adapt their businesses – see p4

Secure your family land with solar

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How to plan crop and soil management after a washout season

Growers have been left with major decisions after poor growing conditions across successive seasons derailed transition plans. **Louise Impey reports**

Soils, rotations and cashflows were all affected by the 2023-24 growing season washout, meaning there are important decisions to be made ahead of the new cropping year. The smallest wheat area since 2020, difficulties with both autumn and spring drilling, grassweed issues and high disease pressure are just some of the challenges thrown up by the very wet and mild year.

For most, the priority is to get rotations back to where they need to be, with the right sequence of crops sown at the appropriate drilling date, while carrying out any remedial work to soils before the drills appear.

The rain that fell for much of the 2023-24

growing season highlighted the need for field drain maintenance, says independent consultant Philip Wright of Wright Resolutions, as well as showing the difference between good and bad drainage. “Healthy crops are grown in healthy soils,” he stresses. “With that in mind, it’s important that soil biology is aerobic and not waterlogged, or it can’t function in the way we need it to.”

A good soil has the right combination of air, water and solids, he says. “If all the pores are filled with water and there’s no oxygen present, as happened last autumn, it poses a threat to biology. That’s why a fast return to field capacity after a wet period helps.” Effective drainage gets air back into the pores or spaces, and once field capacity is reached, it has the right balance of air and water, he adds.

Digging a hole while there’s still a standing crop will tell you much of what’s going on in a field and where there are problems, he advises. “Plant roots will show you if there are any issues that need correcting. You want to max out on roots, as they encourage the soil to structure.” For those keen to use direct-drilling this autumn, his advice is to be pragmatic. “If you’ve got good soil structure and good drainage, plus you are on top of the detail, it can work well. But you are asking a lot of the soil biology.”

Mole draining

Where mole draining is being considered, the soil must be plastic at moling depth. Manipulating it into a “plastic worm” in your hands before rolling it into a horseshoe shape will tell you whether it’s capable of taking a mole – if it cracks, it’s getting

too dry. This is important for channel longevity, says Philip. “You want the soil to be in a drying cycle, so spring or early summer is usually best. However, given the amount of water we’ve had this year, it might be suitable for doing now.”

Strategic soil loosening

If required, correcting compaction can be done with the help of strategic soil loosening or strip loosening, as it puts vertical cracks in the soil. It’s rarely necessary to move the whole soil profile across a width, notes Philip, who says the support columns of soil created between the legs can be useful to stop soils collapsing. “Providing you take care with depth selection, you end up with soil functional zones,” he says. “They can be a pathway to more resilient soils because the biology survives in these columns and can then go on to recolonise the loosened areas.”

Roots stabilise quickly in a zone-tillage system, and heavily trafficked areas, such as headlands, benefit the most. “Strip loosening ahead of oilseed rape or winter beans can provide a good entry to direct-drilled winter wheat, so the benefits go beyond the current crop.”

Rotations

Having 50-60% wheat in the rotation is the aim for most arable farms this autumn, after the disruptions encountered over the past 12 months, according to agronomists. Whatever crop sequence is settled on, aim to give each crop the best opportunity, they stress.

Milling wheat has the highest gross margin in most situations, but the decision over whether to go for a premium-earning variety will depend on >

DRAINAGE: MAIN POINTS

- Soil biology needs to be aerobic
- Aim to get soils back to field capacity quickly after waterlogging
- Ensure current drainage schemes are maintained and functioning
- Back-fill intercepts sub-surface flow and is critical to effective mole drainage on undulating fields
- Crop yield benefits after drainage is installed average 1t/ha
- Spacing of drains is governed by soil texture
- A suitable “drying from the surface” situation for moling is most likely to be found in the spring
- Soil texture at moling depth needs to be consistent

TRANSITION FARMER: DUNCAN BLYTH

Transition Farmer Duncan Blyth, of Albanwise at Barton Blandish in Norfolk, is making some rotational changes ahead of this autumn, but not all of them are due to the disruption caused by a very wet year. While some of his planned heavy-land winter wheat and winter bean areas weren't drilled in autumn 2023 – resulting in an increase in the farm's spring cropping – it is the introduction of some new Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) actions that are behind the biggest change.

OSR out, cover crop in

As a result of the latest expanded SFI 2024 offer, oilseed rape, which has always followed winter barley in the rotation, is on its way out, he reports. In its place, a four-way summer catch crop will go in behind the combine and remain in the ground until September, when an overwinter cover crop will be established. "After that, in the spring, it will be grain maize, which is a very productive crop," he says. "So not only will it be better from a sustainability perspective, that sequence will give us extra income from two SFI crops as well." Oilseed rape doesn't stack up in comparison, Duncan says.

"There's much more risk from flea beetle, slugs and grassweeds while growing rape now, and even though we've had some good crops, it's testing everyone's patience. Hopefully, we will go out on a high this harvest." Whether its omission means slugs will be less of a problem remains to be seen, he acknowledges. "They can really multiply in oilseed rape, so it will be interesting to see if the slug burden reduces over time."

Summer catch crops

Summer catch crops, which will attract an SFI payment of £163/ha this year, have been grown on the farm before. For the past three years, they've had a place after vining peas, which are harvested before the catch crop sowing cut-off date. "Although they've been unfunded up to now, we'll expand the area as it makes much more sense than leaving the soil bare in terms of soil structure and nutrient cycling," he says. "So we're confident they work well and we can fit them in." The following overwinter cover crop, for which the SFI payment rate is £129/ha, can be drilled into the catch crop, if necessary, and will remain in place until February or March. "Maize gets a bad press from time to time, but the environment will benefit from this cover crop approach," Duncan says.

There are still decisions to be made about how the SFI will work more widely at Barton Bendish, he says. Small fields of less than 4ha may be taken out of production and put into a three-year legume fallow, allowing machinery use to be rationalised.

"We've already committed to actions such as zero insecticide on our spring barley and maize." Otherwise, Duncan has had to accept a bigger spring workload this year, after the farm's rainfall saw more than a 50% increase on the average.

Having been unable to get about 20% of the intended winter wheat drilled last autumn, he has spring barley, sugar beet and peas, all of which are looking good. "Heavy land and spring cropping can be tricky – you have to wait for the ground to dry out before you can make a good seed-bed, but there's always a danger it will then bake hard."

The fact there's been adequate moisture throughout the spring has helped, even though some crops were drilled late. Getting behind schedule means the farm is 90ha short of its intended maize area. Looking ahead, Duncan will start his drilling campaign in the last week of September, with winter barley. Grown for malting, he has 270ha planned for harvest 2025.

First wheats

The main focus is first wheats, which will go in from the beginning of October, with

the first grassweed control Avadex being applied at drilling.

Extase and Dawsum are the preferred varieties, but the opportunity to try some Beowulf will also be taken. "Before that, we've got some remedial work to do on our soils. An inevitable consequence of such a wet year is that there's quite a bit of subsoiling to be done. Getting the basics right is so important."

Part of that work is due to having nearly 400ha of sugar beet – three-quarters of which is Conviso Smart beet to simplify workloads – as part of the rotation. Neonicotinoid seed treatments haven't been used for the past two years, so their loss under a potentially different approach from the new government isn't a huge concern. "Without insecticide input, predator numbers have built up. We do monitor aphid numbers in the spring and thresholds haven't been reached, so that's reassuring."

● Follow Duncan Blyth and our other Transition Farmers as they adapt their business for the new environmental schemes. Find out more on p4





Duncan Blyth's cropping plans had to be revised after a 50% increase in rainfall

< individual attitude to risk and previous success at meeting specification. Latest figures suggest that it will cost an extra £141/ha to grow a Group 1 variety, as nitrogen prices are slightly higher than anticipated and disease risks remain a concern.

Costings show that at a yield of 8.5t/ha, a grain price of £200/t and a £40/t premium, a feed wheat variety would have to produce an additional 1.7t/ha in yield to match the milling wheat margin. Put another way, a £20/t premium would ensure a break-even situation if the yields were similar. While the reward is there to grow milling wheats, businesses that do so will require more cash to service the growing costs. For that reason, it may be that Group 2 and feed wheats are more attractive for their lower cost and risk.

STRATEGIC SOIL LOOSENING

- Aim to get vertical cracks in the soil
- Soil columns left between the low-disturbance stretching action of loosening legs support traffic and profile stability
- Undisturbed zones also maintain soil bacterial life, allowing the mycorrhizae to recolonise the loosened areas and keeping populations higher than with conventional tillage
- Payback should be achieved in the same season, with the legacy remaining where preventative measures follow

NEW CROPPING YEAR

- More wheat to drill
- Remedial cultivations required – identify issues
- Nitrogen price higher than anticipated
- Test stored seed
- Stale seed-bed, cultivation and drill date will be critical – high levels of grassweed seed return are likely
- Consider seed-bed quality for pre-emergence herbicide efficacy

Costs and cashflow

Higher costs have been a feature of this year and predictions for the 2024 harvest indicate that some businesses will experience a cashflow crisis. Gary Markham of Land Family Business says there are several factors that have contributed to this – one of which is the high tax bills resulting from 2022. “We saw a bumper harvest in 2022, with high yields and prices, while early purchases of inputs that year kept their costs down. However, since then, input costs have shot up and have needed to be funded. We’re also seeing average machinery costs running at about £114/t of wheat, while establishment costs went up where areas had to be redrilled.” He believes arable businesses which have not established a reasonable alternative income will find it difficult to fund their way through the rest of the year.



Peas were sown on land originally earmarked for wheat before the rain set in

That is where the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) has a role, suggests Jonty Armitage of Strutt & Parker, who adds that arable profitability forecasts are showing the financial impact of six months of exceptionally wet weather, changes in commodity prices and falling Basic Payment Scheme income. “For harvest 2024, the forecast net margin for an average-performing business is just £80/ha, some 60% lower than it was in 2023. If crop rotations and yields return to more normal levels for 2025, then the net margin is forecast to rise to £214/ha for an average performer and £449/ha for higher-performing farms, he says.

Given current uncertainty, the SFI can be used to take risk out of businesses, suggests Jonty. “Using it to take out the worst-performing or lowest-margin crops, replacing them with a fixed return with very little risk attached, will make sense for some. Then you can focus your efforts on more profitable crops and give them the attention to detail they deserve.” ■

Top tips on how to maximise the benefits of the 2024 SFI offer

Careful planning is the key to designing a Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) agreement that builds financial, agronomic and environmental resilience within your farming business



The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme has been through multiple revisions since it was first piloted in 2022.

The latest of these is the expanded 2024 offer, which builds on the 2023 version of the scheme but introduces new options focused on precision farming, flood mitigation, climate change resilience, agroforestry and the uplands.

Strutt & Parker's specialist Farming team is working with clients to establish how different packages of SFI actions can be used to best effect to build financial and environmental resilience within a business.

"Choosing the right options takes careful planning, particularly as the number of actions which farmers can choose from is increasing from 23 to 102," says Jonathan Armitage, Head of Farming for Strutt & Parker.

"Consider your objectives carefully. The increased range of available management options means there is much wider scope for achieving meaningful and rewarding environmental outcomes for the farm. However, for farming businesses relying on these payments for an improved level of income, it is important to consider the costs and management implications of your proposed scheme."

While the headline income figures for some options look very attractive, they can be expensive to deliver.

For example, the option of flower-rich grass margins or blocks has had a lot of interest due to the high payment rate (£798/ha), but it can be a high-risk option owing to the need to establish wildflowers, which can be difficult on fertile arable land. Careful and sometimes time-consuming management is often needed to prevent grasses and weeds taking over.

There are some options which are attracting less attention, such as the establishment and maintenance of grassy field corners and blocks, where the payment is lower at £590/ha, but with lower management requirements after initial establishment.

"The pick-and-mix nature of the SFI scheme also means it can be tempting to try lots of different options, but this will lead to complexity in managing the agreement. It may be better to start off with a limited number of options that are financially prudent and targeted to deliver real environmental gains," says Jonathan.

Farmers entering into an agreement should also make sure they understand the recordkeeping requirements to show how each SFI outcome in the agreement has been achieved. Every option requires some sort of evidence and some more than others.

This may include photographs and other documentation to show what you have done, including providing copies of associated invoices.

Thought will need to be given as to how you gather and store this information on an ongoing basis.

There are, of course, wider business considerations to factor into decision making such as the impact on fixed costs which will be spread over a smaller area. But an upside is that it may be possible to run machinery for longer.

"Our specialist advisers are experienced in designing agreements that are profitable, practical to deliver, and also beneficial for the environment," says Jonathan.

To find out more

Call 07881 257178

Email

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Visit rural.struttandparker.com

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BNP PARIBAS GROUP



Polysulphate productivity and environmental benefits

Growers choosing ICL's Polysulphate fertiliser and reporting improved nitrogen use efficiency (NUE), yield gains and crop quality, can now add a reduced carbon footprint to its list of benefits.



Polysulphate is already known as a high efficiency low-carbon fertiliser with significant productivity and environmental benefits, but the latest 90% reduction in its carbon footprint to 0.0029kg CO₂e per kg of product, further enhances its role in helping decarbonise food production, says ICL's Richard Ward

"The growing number of farmers using Polysulphate already appreciate the nutritional benefits of the product (48% SO₃, 14% K₂O, 17% CaO and 6% MgO) help drive nitrogen use efficiency (NUE) in crops, from both mineral nitrogen fertilisers or organic sources.

"Furthermore, its prolonged release characteristics also help reduce potential losses of valuable nutrients into water and air, improving both the efficiency with which plants take these up and reducing possible environmental issues."

Trials have shown these efficiency improvements translate into sizeable economic gains for growers, he points out.

"We've seen average yield increases of 10-11% on grassland and arable crops alongside better establishment and root development. Oilseed rape and other brassica crops have shown average yield improvements of 12-15% with this rising to 35 - 40% on sulphur deficient soils.

"In potato and other vegetable crops,

average yield gains of 12 - 15% and significant quality benefits have been reported.

"Recognition of these benefits is growing rapidly, with thousands of farmers now using the product regularly and interest from agricultural advisers increasing accordingly."

Helping meet sustainability targets

The reduction in carbon footprint demonstrates ICL's commitment to helping the food and farming industry meet its sustainability and carbon targets, he says.

"Traditionally manufactured sulphur fertilisers, now all imported into the UK and combining both nitrogen and sulphur, are increasingly under the spotlight as major carbon contributors in the food supply chain. "But with UK produced Polysulphate containing no nitrogen, far more accurate management of both N and S can be achieved which, along with the product's exceptionally low carbon footprint and other efficiency gains, allows much more sustainable production.

"In fact, a recent paper by Prof. David Powlson, Emeritus scientist at Rothamsted Research, concluded that if all the UK's ammonium sulphate was replaced with Polysulphate, the ammonia emissions associated with sulphur

fertiliser applications would be cut by over 90%."

Autumn application benefits

An autumn application of Polysulphate to supplement conventional spring timings can increase wheat yields by 0.3t/ha trials suggest

Better nutrient utilisation efficiency and increased root development are the main reasons behind the highly cost-effective benefits, says ICL agronomist Scott Garnett.

"Previous trials have shown a 5 - 8% increase in yields from spring-applied Polysulphate by itself, with three years of trials showing an average yield of 10.49t/ha.

"But when this was preceded by an autumn application of Polysulphate, an average yield of 10.79t/ha was seen alongside significant environmental benefits."

To find out more

Call 01287 640140

Email enquiries@icl-group.com

Visit www.icl-growingsolutions.com/en-gb/



How to plan for water security and drought resilience



Water loss can be cut by maintaining soil cover

Long-term projections point to extended periods of hotter, drier weather. **Louise Impey** looks at measures to safeguard water supplies

It has been much wetter than average this year, but our changing climate means that prolonged dry spells are tipped to become more frequent. Extreme drought years are expected to become the norm and farmers are being urged to take steps to improve the sector's resilience. Average summer rainfall and river flows could decline by 25% and 45% respectively by 2050, according to Met Office projections, creating an urgency to put things in place that help with water scarcity and high temperatures.

If the world continues to create high levels of emissions, the projections suggest that winters will become 1-4.5C warmer and up to 30% wetter, summers will be 1-6C warmer and up to 60% drier, while hot summer days will be 4-7C warmer. The optimal temperature for humans is 15-20C, with those working outside starting to suffer heat effects from 27C. For animals, heat stress starts to kick in as temperatures reach the upper 20s. Crops start to suffer at 30C, with wheat yields dropping by 4% for each degree above 32C.

Water scarcity

At the same time, demand for water will rise in every sector of society, as higher temperatures increase water requirements for crops and livestock, while population growth drives up water demand from domestic users. Climate change, increased demand and the need to protect the environment mean that up to an extra 6.2bn litres of water will be needed in change to the UK every day by 2050.

Pressures on water will be greatest in the

south and east of England, where the UK grows much of its higher value crops and where agriculture is already struggling to cope with risks posed by water scarcity, says Dr Timothy Foster of the University of Manchester.

"In 2022, the UK experienced its fifth driest summer since 1836," he points out. "Along with record-breaking temperatures, this led to severe drought conditions resulting in reductions in

crop yields and harvested areas."

While it might seem strange to be talking about drought after one of the wettest winters and springs on record, he believes the UK needs to make significant changes to the way water is managed and shared. "Not only does farming need a louder voice in the debate around water, we need reforms to abstraction rules and investment in new water infrastructure. We also

CASE STUDY: NORTH YORKSHIRE GRAZING SYSTEM

The use of deeper-rooting, more drought-tolerant cocksfoot in grazing swards is being investigated by a group of 10 farmers in North Yorkshire. They believe the underutilised grass species could have a more prominent place in their grazing systems, so they are sharing their experiences in a project that will help determine the ideal percentage to add to leys.

As farmer and adviser Fraser Hugill explains, cocksfoot has a number of things to offer farms in the area, one of which is its ability to thrive in increasingly dry conditions. "We know it lasts longer and is better for the environment than traditional ryegrass-based swards," he says. "Thanks to its deeper and more complex root

system, it also remains green and growing when water is scarce. That root system also helps with better water infiltration and carbon capture – things that we are measuring in this project with the help of researchers." A longer-lasting grass species, cocksfoot does not require re-seeding as often and grows earlier in the season, while needing less fertiliser, he adds. "It could extend our grazing season and keep costs down, as well as helping our farms deal with unpredictable weather."

The project is in its first year and has been funded in part by a Farming in Protected Landscapes grant. "If it doesn't work, it doesn't matter," says Fraser. "We are taking a risk, but we all have to be prepared to look at ways that will improve our resilience."



Fraser Hugill



Systems for capturing rainwater can be relatively simple to install



Grants are available to help fund larger water storage ventures

< need more flexibility with water managing and sharing arrangements, like those that exist in other countries where water scarcity pressures have been present for some time.”

Capturing water

This is a view shared by others, including the NFU, which points out that the UK has enough water to produce food – it’s just not always in the right place at the right time. The union believes we must get better at capturing and storing water, as well as moving it around. This means an abstraction system that allows for

excess water capture and more on-farm reservoirs, which would benefit farmers as well as wider society. As a result, the NFU made it one of its election requests and is waiting to see how the new government responds. Until this happens, there are measures that farmers can introduce to help. There are various short and long-term ways to make your land less vulnerable to water shortages:

Soil health Healthy soils with a higher organic matter content are able to hold more water, helping in a dry period, but also have better water infiltration rates in wet conditions. Organic matter includes fresh plant residue, such as litter and decaying roots, plus decomposing crop residue and manures.

Soil cover Keeping soils covered helps to reduce water loss by evaporation and also protects the soil from wind and water erosion. In addition, residue management has a role in preventing the soil from drying out and from over-heating, as well as for suppressing weeds.

Cover crops Incorporating cover crops into the rotation helps with drought resilience in many ways, from contributing to soil cover to introducing deep-rooted species that help to break up the soil, improving drainage and reducing run-off, while accessing water from depth. They can also be retained and then ploughed in as a green manure, adding organic matter.

Multispecies swards Livestock farms are benefiting from the introduction of multispecies swards and herbal leys, as they bring different tolerances to changing water levels. In drought conditions, deeper rooting species such as chicory can still access water.

Reduced tillage Reducing soil disturbance helps to increase the organic carbon content of the soil, allowing soil organic matter to accumulate and soils to become more resilient. Reduced or no-till practices also help to improve soil function and allow the soil biology to thrive, while limiting moisture loss.

PROPOSED NEW RESERVOIRS FOR ENGLAND

Three new reservoirs are planned to help increase more water storage capacity in the UK.

Havant Thicket, the first new drinking-water reservoir to be built in decades, is already under construction near Portsmouth. A collaboration between Portsmouth Water and Southern Water, it will help to protect two of the rarest chalk streams in the country. When it opens, 160,000 local residents will be supplied with 21m litres of water every day. Expected to be fully open by 2029, it is an 8.7bn litre storage reservoir spanning 160ha.

Elsewhere, one of the driest regions of the country, the east of England, is set to get two new reservoirs, helping to secure water supplies for decades and make the region more resilient to the risks of drought and flooding. The proposed sites are in The Fens, between Chatteris and March, and Lincolnshire, between Grantham and Boston, with both new facilities expected to be similar in size to Grafham Water. Anglian Water is involved in both projects – the Fens reservoir is being developed in conjunction with Cambridge Water. The proposals are at an early stage, with the first consultation completed, and work on constructing the reservoirs is not expected to start until 2029.

Rotational changes Crops that require less water, such as rye and grain maize, or those that have a shorter growing season, could be considered by growers on drought-prone land. In addition, crops that can be planted and harvested later, or varieties that offer greater drought tolerance, may have a part to play.

Rainwater harvesting Installing a system to catch the rainwater that drains from shed roofs and other farm infrastructure, before being stored on-site in tanks, makes sense for most farms. On arable units, the water tends to be used for spraying, while on livestock farms it can be used to wash down and clean yards.

Tree planting Targeted tree planting will add organic matter to the soil, boosting water retention and helping combat drought conditions. Trees also provide shade and shelter, reducing heat stress and heat exposure in livestock. Evidence also suggest that shelterbelts of native trees help crops to use water more efficiently.

Irrigation efficiency Moving from traditional irrigation practices to systems that have better water use efficiency, such as sprinkler and micro-irrigation equipment, can see water use



Increasing soil organic matter improves water infiltration and retention properties

efficiency levels increase up to 95%. Drip irrigation, for example, delivers water straight to the plant's root zone, minimising evaporation and run-off losses.

Farm borehole Farms at the mercy of an erratic mains water supply may be able to install their own borehole, subject to certain conditions. In general, the higher your water use, the more you have to gain, as farm boreholes can save money and improve output. Up to 20,000 litres/day can be used at no charge – those with greater demand require an abstraction licence.

Farm water supplies

Mains water Supplied by wholesalers as part of the public supply network.

Abstracted water Taken from rivers, streams, ponds, wells and boreholes.

Water harvesting/recycled water Caught from roofing or captured to be reused, often after storage.

Stored water Held in reservoirs, ponds and tanks.

Emergency water supplies From specialist companies providing tankered water. ■

WHAT GOVERNMENT FUNDING EXISTS?

Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)

Among the 102 actions that are now in the expanded SFI 2024 offer are 21 high-priority actions, which are deemed as having the biggest environmental impact. Two of those relate specifically to drought resilience and attract higher payment rates. "Manage grassland for flood and drought resilience and water quality" is a 10-year action worth £938/ha. To qualify, grassland has to be managed to reduce run-off from rainwater, as well as to store more surface and groundwater through changes such as creating topographical features. "Manage features on arable land for flood and drought resilience and water quality" is a five-year action, with a payment rate of £1,241/ha. In it, features on arable land, such as sediment traps, bunds, swales and their surrounding areas, are managed to reduce run-off from rainwater and store more surface and groundwater.

Managing Water Resources Fund

A new £1.6m fund launched by the government in April 2024 offers support to groups of farmers to work together to store water and protect against the impact of drought. It can be used by farmers to investigate different methods of managing water, with projects such as multi-farm reservoirs, treated waste water recycling schemes and water trading/sharing schemes all being encouraged. The fund will support about 20 studies, as well as investigating water demand and availability in the most water-stressed areas over the next 25 years. Applications opened in April 2024, with groups of two or more neighbouring farms eligible to apply. It is hoped that the fund will help to identify opportunities that build on the success of existing projects, such as the Felixstowe Hydrocycle and the Lincoln Water Transfer.

Water Management Grant (Round 2) – up to £500,000

The second round of the grant is under way, with those invited to make a full application following the first step to check eligibility having until the end of

October 2024 to submit their plans. Open to horticultural and arable businesses, the grant is to pay for capital items for a project that helps improve farm productivity through more efficient use of water and to secure water supplies for crop irrigation. In the main, that means support for building on-farm reservoirs, but it also covers the adoption of best-practice irrigation techniques and irrigation infrastructure. Up to £10m in funding is available, with grants of £35,000 up to a maximum of £500,000 per applicant business on offer. If relevant, the necessary planning permission and abstraction licences have to be in place before a full application is submitted.

Eligible capital items include:

- Equipment for more efficient water application, such as changing from rain guns to trickle or boom irrigation
- Securing water supply for crop irrigation that allows more sustainable water use, such as constructing an on-farm reservoir
- Improving business resilience and prosperity, such as new irrigation systems or newly irrigated areas
- Encouraging collaboration for water storage and irrigation of crops
- Once a positive decision has been made by Defra and a grant funding agreement secured, it is hoped that any projects will be completed within 18 months.

Capital grants

Open for applications for the whole of 2024, farm capital grants can be used to achieve environmental benefits in four broad groups – two of which are water quality and natural flood management. As many as 70 capital items are eligible in three-year agreements, with some of the items listed requiring support and approval from Catchment Sensitive Farming. Among the items that qualify for funding include pipework, fencing, biofilters, troughs and above-and-below ground tanks – all of which may have a place in drought resilience on farms. Trees and tree planting are also on the funding list.



The previous government put in place a range of capital and management grants to help store water

Overcoming challenge of new government and succession

Our *Farmers Weekly* Transition farmers are striving to secure a better future for their businesses. **Debbie James** reports from Cumbria and Carmarthenshire

FARM FACTS

JG & DE Hodgson,
Kirkbride,
Cumbria

- **Farm size:** 244ha. Cereals, grassland and 120,000 broilers
- **Annual rainfall:** 1,250mm
- **Soil:** Heavy red clay, silty sand, black peat



the foundations for all we are doing today; the business owes everything to them," he says.

Just as they passed the baton of responsibility to Vaughan and Sandra, the couple have brought the next generation into the business, recently making their sons, Karl, 27, and Ryan, 23, partners. Two farm diversifications – a caustic wheat enterprise and a construction and fabrication business – have helped with that process, as each requires different skills and management. What began as a small-scale caustic wheat business, with a second-hand mixer and a handful of local contracts, has developed into a thriving enterprise working alongside several feed consultancy firms, with Karl the driving force pushing that pace of growth. To further drive efficiencies, an HGV and bulk trailer have also been purchased to enable in-house deliveries and collections.

Ryan is in charge of the construction and fabrication business, a “turn-key” operation

TRANSITION GOALS

- Support next generation
- Replace lost basic payments
- Cope with increasingly uncertain weather

that sees him delivering every stage of contracts.

He and his team also undertake all repairs, service and maintenance of the farm vehicles, reducing costs and down time. Vaughan says it is important that farmers give the next generation more responsibility and accountability over time, with partial control of the finances and day-to-day decisions. “If people are made responsible for business decisions, it is important to be accountable,” he reckons.

To help with succession, Vaughan and Sandra are investing money off-farm to enable their daughter to be independent of the business, and accelerating payments into their pension pot too, to secure their own financial futures.

- **Turn to p4 for more on our Transition Farmers**

Vaughan Hodgson

The death of Vaughan Hodgson’s father has brought into sharp focus important reasons for succession planning in a diverse family farming business. Vaughan says he owes everything to his parents, Geoff, who passed away in June at the age of 87, and Dot, who is 82. “They laid

Irwel Jones

While the delayed rollout of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) has been welcomed by many Welsh farmers, it leaves upland lamb producer Irwel Jones’ plans in limbo. Although there is the cushion of the full Basic Payment Scheme until 2025, it injects another year of uncertainty into his transition goals.

His business is about £8,000/year worse off, too, since the Welsh government introduced the Habitat Wales Scheme to bridge the gap between Glastir and the new SFS, and with it different payment rates.

With 73ha of oak woodland designated a site of special scientific interest, 57ha of rough grazing and other features, Aberbranddu is a

good candidate to meet the requirements of the new SFS. But in its current form, Irwel doubts it would be worth entering the scheme.

He is keen to plant another 10ha of oaks on rough, steep land that can’t be farmed for food production, and to introduce more hedges at the top of the farm as shelter belts. However, he is reluctant to progress this work because he doesn’t know what will be on offer under the SFS.

Grant funding has allowed him to deliver, in part, another of his transition goals: reducing reliance on compound fertiliser and other volatile inputs. In May, through the Growing For The Environment scheme, he introduced more diverse seed mixes into 11ha of herbal leys, receiving £320/ha to create more drought-tolerant grazing for fattening lambs – feed that doesn’t need nitrogen fertiliser to grow.

Irwel will graze the leys rotationally to maximise their longevity. A proviso of the scheme is to improve soil fertility, so he is applying lime at 2t/acre to increase pH from 5.8 to an index of 6 or higher.

Irwel had already made big reductions in purchased fertiliser use before he became a

FARM FACTS

Aberbranddu
Farm, Llanwrda,
Carmarthenshire

- **Farm size:** 375ha acres (255ha owned and 120ha rented)
- **Annual rainfall:** 2,000mm
- **Soil type:** Clay, and peaty on marshy areas



Transition Farmer, but he has cut applications further, to 33 units/acre of N on grazing land and 70 units/acre on silage ground.

Access to grazing on lower fields has been improved thanks to an unexpected offer of funding from the West Wales Rivers Trust to fence 2,000m of streamside banks.

That money also paid for 15 troughs and solar pumps to fill them from the stream.

How to protect your business from a crisis

Effective contingency planning can help farm businesses to keep trading through emergency situations. **Debbie James** finds out more

From flooding and drought to fire and disease, climate change puts UK farms at greater risk from disruptive emergencies. Farms that might previously have known once-in-a-generation flooding could now be under water with greater frequency as extreme weather events become more commonplace.

Emerging livestock and plant diseases resulting from a warming planet are an added threat. Some emergency situations – machinery breakdowns, staff absence and legislative breaches – are not new. What they all have in common, though, is how they can hit a farm's ability to function as normal, to meet its supply contracts and other obligations.

Transition is adding financial pressure to these situations, by removing the cushion of an area-based payment. Ian Silcox-Crowe, sustainability lead at crop nutrition specialist Omex, says it has never been more important for farmers to have a robust business continuity plan (BCP), one that imagines several hypothetical events, that asks the "what ifs", while putting actions in place to minimise their impact should these potential situations occur.

"Ask yourself what the probable emergencies are that could affect your business and what you would do to deal with each of those, work out how you would cope for various periods of time," Ian advises. "By considering these scenarios now, when everyone is calm, and by preparing a list of actions, important decisions can be made when people are not in a state of panic."

Not only does it make good business sense, but new legislation is likely to force farmers in this direction, too. The government framework for climate-related financial disclosures directs large companies such as milk and meat processors and grain buyers to ensure their supply chains are robust.

To satisfy this, Ian says farmers will need to be able to demonstrate they have plans in place to cope with a range of eventualities, and this will also reassure lenders. "The question farmers and growers need to ask themselves is, 'could my farm survive if it was shut down for a period of time?'" he says. "Think about the responses for a shutdown of one day, one week, one month, one farming season – such as harvest and lambing – and one year." A good plan will imagine a variety of possible events, from natural disasters to human error, and puts in place actions that would be taken in the event that any one of these does happen.

The greater the likelihood or impact of a disaster or emergency, the greater the need for contingency planning. An avian influenza outbreak, for example, could be defined as both a disaster and an emergency because of its finan-

cial impact and the need to prevent infection spreading.

As a starting point to formulating a plan, Ian recommends that farmers make a list of business-critical functions specific to them. They should then consider how the business could maintain operations if it experienced staff absence, a critical machine breakdown, an extreme climate event and water and power failures, to name but a few. "Would any of these prevent the business from fulfilling agreed contracts, and for what period of time – read contracts carefully to fully understand obligations and penalties," says Ian.

Business-critical functions will be specific to different enterprises, and to different times of the year. In the case of an arable farm, for example, having a combine that is working and has an operator is business-critical at harvest but having an operational sprayer is not – at different times of the year, the enterprise will have different business-critical issues. Cropping operations are often time-limited and labour-intensive, so farms should have a contingency plan should someone in the team be unable to work.





< “For a dairy farm, it is the functioning of the milking installation that is business-critical. Flooding on a few fields is not,” Ian explains. “In the case of an intensive livestock unit where activists are blockading the access, preventing staff getting to work or the feed lorry getting in, that situation might only last for a day before the police intervene. Therefore it is not business-critical.”

“But if there was a fire that prevented the business from operating for a year, that’s catastrophic, so that business would need to include in the plan how in that situation it would pay its staff and communicate with its customers if it can’t meet its supply obligations.”

The loss of an employee for a day is unlikely to be business-critical to any farm, but if it was for a period of time, it could be – for example, a sheep farm losing its shepherd for the lambing season. In all cases, the possible impact on animal welfare needs to be considered and planned for.

Disease and extreme weather risks make farms more exposed than ever before. NFU senior adviser Richard Wordsworth says that in the past five years some have dealt with the repercussions of a crisis for the first time – crops failing and major flooding as a result of exceptional rain and heat – while others have yet to experience one.

While it is not uncommon in farming to take calculated risks, applying that approach to business-critical events is unwise, he cautions. “When we leave the house, we don’t put the canoe on the roof of the car in case of flooding;

we don’t take a spare battery for our phone. We take a calculated risk. But when you have staff to pay, loans to repay, and contracts to honour, you have to plan for events that might never occur.”

Water management

“Water supply is critical to a dairy farm – consider the consequences if the borehole fails, but also check when it was last serviced and consider how long the cows could be kept in drinking water before they run dry,” advises Ian. “Do you have a water bowser, or can one be borrowed from a neighbour? Speak to that neighbour now. It might be that you need two bowsters to meet supply, so speak to two neighbours; build that mutual help network.”

Consider what can be done in advance to reduce risk – that could be harvesting and stor-

ing rainwater, investing in renewable energy, or planned machinery maintenance. Richard says there are inexpensive actions that people can take to mitigate the fallout from an emergency. “Be smart with how you manage your risk, as even if you haven’t got the money to do the big stuff, everyone can, for example, draw up a list of their suppliers; people they can call on.” Supply risk can be reduced by having more than one supplier. “That may annoy suppliers, as everyone wants your business exclusively, but being on the books of two businesses is a derisking exercise in itself.”

Mitigating impact of unexpected events

Although not business-critical, high prices for energy, fertiliser and other inputs have provided lessons in low-level business continuity management, with farms buying these strategically. Hamish Wardrop, a consultant at Agrovista, says when fuel prices peaked, one of his customers trebled their diesel storage capacity from 5,000 litres to 15,000 to allow purchasing at volume ahead of future price increases.

Think about cashflow – it may be possible to renegotiate the overdraft to allow more strategic purchasing, he advises. “Even a smaller family farm can start to behave like a big business,” Hamish says. “I also always make sure that every farm I work with accesses every grant relevant to it.”

He sees diversification as a form of business continuity management, as diversified income can support the main farming business during an unexpected crisis. “A farm is an asset which can grow crops and raise livestock, among other things. Farmers also need to look at that asset

CONTINUITY CHECKLIST

- Make a list of who needs informing in the event of a business-critical incident for different scenarios, checking that contact details are current.
- Share the contents of your BCP and its location with the relevant people.
- Set up a mutual support group with neighbours – for example, agree to lend staff or machinery in the event of an emergency, or jointly purchase an emergency generator.



Planning for possible emergencies can turn a crisis into a process

BENEFITS OF BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING

- Allows time to think through situations calmly and clearly
- Gives time to consult with relevant parties
- Prevents panicked decision-making
- Turns a crisis into a process
- Reassures banks and lenders

CASE STUDY: JOE ADAMS, FELIXSTOWE, KENT

Farming heavy soils on a natural floodplain in a region with lower-than-average summer rainfall mean that for dairy farmer Joe Adams, the challenges waterlogging and drought present to his business are not unexpected. But, with weather-related events now becoming more frequent, he is taking further steps to increase the farm's resilience to those emergencies.

Joe farms 180ha at Gulpher Farm, near Felixstowe, where he and his father, Richard, produce milk from a high-yielding herd of 160 Holsteins. The soil is heavy marsh land that is susceptible to drought and waterlogging. But what he describes as the "worst-case scenario" of both occurring in a single year is now a reality.

Minimising their impact has therefore become a necessity to enable the business to continue operating through those pinch points. For Joe, business continuity planning has meant incorporating deeper-rooting clover varieties into the grass leys, cultivating with minimal soil disturbance to build up structure, and creating drainage channels to draw moisture from lower down in the soil profile.

He has also secured an abstraction licence and installed irrigation infrastructure as a safety net for dry weather emergencies. He first used this during the prolonged period of drought in 2020, to germinate his maize crop, and has also found himself using it after taking first- and second-cut grass silage to kick-start regrowth when there is no natural moisture. Using grass varieties that are more resilient to drought is helping to protect growth.

Joe also has one eye on potential future

labour challenges – one reason why he is currently in the process of replacing his conventional parlour with three milking robots. "Although labour currently isn't an issue, it might become so," he says. "We know of farmers in this area who definitely struggle with getting staff."

Robot milking will also satisfy the ambition he has to introduce three-times-a-day milking in his conventional system. The new shed has been designed with the changing climate in mind, as ventilation fans have been installed to make conditions more comfortable for cows. All these changes will help Joe and his father to continue to meet the requirements of their milk supply contract in challenging periods.

Joe is also keeping an open mind about introducing further changes, such as zero grazing. "There are always options out there that we will explore," he says. His strategy is to trial one change at a time, as he recognises that not all will be successful – growing clover, for example. "My grandfather warned that we would struggle to grow clover on the marshes, but plant breeding is so much better now than when he was farming, and for us it has been successful.

"I like to introduce little changes in isolation, rather than rolling them all out at once, because whether something works or not, it means we haven't put all our eggs in one basket." Joe sees farming as a risk-based industry, but with this gradual approach, not "jumping in with both feet", he says he has some control over the steps he is taking to protect his business against those risks.

and what is around the periphery, because one of the most useful things they can do in terms of resilience is to maximise that asset.

"The successful businesses I see have lots of fingers in lots of pies. For me, a well-diversified business equals resilience against the unexpected." He cites as an example hot, dry summers when crop and grassland production have come under severe pressure, but for farms that have diversified into tourism, that weather has helped their tourism business flourish.

Having the correct insurance in place is another important factor in business continuity management. In many other industries, insurers require a BCP to protect their risk. Hamish says he has seen examples of farmers who have had the correct, and the incorrect, insurance when an unexpected event has occurred, and the outcomes for each has been very different.

Although it might seem an unlikely condition for securing a loan, he believes evidence of a BCP can provide a bank with additional reassurance. "It is not necessarily something lenders will ask for, but if you are approaching them to borrow money, you can show them that, as well as being a sound business, this is you being prepared too," he says. ■



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Webinar #9 Diversification vs Specialisation

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Securing a Sustainable Future for Farming

When it comes to improving farm income, is it best to diversify and do something completely different? Or is it best to specialise and add value to existing enterprises?

In this webinar, our expert panel weighed up which options could offer you the best long-term business future.

Bigger herd reaps reward and deer destroy trees

Two of our *Farmers Weekly* Transition farmers are making steady progress towards a more sustainable future. **Debbie James** reports



FARM FACTS
Dalchomie Farm, Kirkoswald
 ● Farm size: 285ha, split across three units
 ● Annual rainfall: 1,016mm
 ● Soil type: Upland 100-280m

in September, saw wheat yields of 10t/ha but just 6t/ha for barley.

Although more expensive to grow, Andrew says winter wheat will make the business more resilient. “We have taken winter barley out of the rotation completely as it doesn’t seem to work for us here and we now have 30ha of winter wheat.”

Half will be wholecropped in July to include in the finishing ration, and the remainder combined. Spring barley is also grown on 40ha, but the amount fed in the ration has been reduced and replaced with fodder beet.

As well as growing more fodder beet, Andrew plans to graze it for the first time to reduce cost. A 4ha field with drier land has been earmarked for grazing bullocks, while 8ha will be lifted and fed in the shed. Andrew says fodder beet is a “fantastically good feed for cattle”.

One of the chief risks is losing it to frost, but Andrew hopes that a fungicide application along with a late dressing of nitrogen (N) will maintain the leaf canopy for as long as possible. With 15ha of beans grown to provide the protein element of the diet, minerals are the only bought-in feed. The finishing ration consists of 7kg wholecrop, 7kg of a 14% blend of barley and

TRANSITION GOALS

- Increase cattle numbers and cut finishing time
- Reduce dependence on inputs
- Improve grassland and access.

beans, 7kg of fodder beet, and minerals.

“Feeding less cereal and more fodder beet over that 100-day fattening period seems to be working because we are maintaining average daily liveweight gains of 1.5kg/head,” says Andrew.

To meet the Transition goal of improving grassland, he has reseeded 12ha of silage land with a seed mix incorporating red clover. But the unusual weather conditions have hit hard. “Although the clover is there it isn’t doing well, the plants have had cold, wet feet,” says Andrew.

“The nodules are there and they are the right colour and working, but they are not big enough to produce enough N. It is so tempting to slap on N, but I have been advised not to as it will make the clover lazy.” No N is applied to the silaging fields, only to grazing grassland; by mid-June, 120kg/ha of liquid N had been applied across two dressings.

● Turn to p4 for more on our Transition Farmers

Andrew McFadzean

Increasing cattle numbers by 10% has helped costs of production and cashflow in Andrew McFadzean’s beef finishing business. Now, with continental- and native-crosses fattened at 400 head a year, he has diluted his fixed costs.

It also means that the value of home-grown cereals and other crops can be maximised. Focus has shifted from growing winter barley to winter wheat, as wetter winters are adversely affecting barley yield. The 2023 harvest, taken

Andy Bason

Deer, voles and extreme weather have taken their toll on a newly planted agroforestry venture at Newhouse Farm in Hampshire.

Farm manager Andy Bason oversaw the planting of 350 fruit trees in a 10ha arable field as a self-funded agroforestry project. But what Andy hadn’t counted on was the appeal they would have to fallow deer.

Wire mesh guards proved to be an inadequate defence against the deer, which descended on fields in large herds, as many as 150 at a time. They destroyed the new growth on many of the trees by chewing them to a point below where they had been grafted.

The decision was taken to uproot all of the remaining trees and replant them this autumn under a Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) agroforestry option. “Advice we have had is that it is better to start again completely from scratch in the field, this time with 1.5m-high guards,” says Andy.

He admits that funding from the SFI is an important incentive for giving it another go. “When we first planted, there was no funding for agroforestry, but we are in a much better place with the SFI.”

Some trees were salvaged after the deer invaded. These have been relocated to a 10ha woodland that was established on the farm in the autumn of 2023 using a grant from the English Woodland Creation Offer. The business received £6,300/ha to meet the capital cost of planting the land, with 80% native broad-leaf trees and 20% non-native species, and will be paid £350/ha for 15 years to maintain them.

The extreme weather in 2023 also hit young



FARM FACTS
Newhouse Farm, Northington Down, Alresford, Hampshire
 ● Farm size: 800ha main farm
 ● Annual rainfall: 770mm
 ● Soil type: Loam

trees on the farm. Known as whips, the young trees died because of the exceptionally dry conditions of the spring. “On the scale we have, it wasn’t possible to water or irrigate,” says Andy.

TRANSITION GOALS

- 30% cut in carbon emissions
- Establish 10ha of agroforestry
- Establish 10ha of woodland

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEFF HOLMES, RICHARD STANTON



Spring green: Transition Live at Park Farm in Cambridgeshire

Transition Live: Top advice and practical know-how

Farmers Weekly's inaugural Transition Live event has been hailed a success after hundreds of visitors descended on Cambridge University's Park Farm

The event took place in warm, spring sunshine and visitors were able to choose from a range of lively panel sessions on how to make farming sustainable through the transition period and beyond.

Issues were covered by farmer-speakers, policymakers and key industry experts under three broad headings – food production, business and the environment.

Some of the topics covered:

- Taking the risk out of farm businesses
- Collaboration
- Long-term planning
- Tree planting
- Generating revenue from natural capital
- Managing carbon
- Renewable energy opportunities
- Improving soil health
- Optimising arable margins
- Securing the future of livestock farming

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHIL WEEDON, RICHARD STANTON



The then Defra secretary Steve Barclay also delivered a keynote speech after driving directly from a debate in Westminster. Mr Barclay stayed at the event to answer queries and listen to concerns of visitors.

Beyond the debates in conference marquees, there was also an option to take part in a farm

walk hosted by Cambridge University's Park Farm manager Paul Kelly.

The host farm is a Linking Environment And Farming (Leaf) demonstration unit with a 230-cow housed Holstein-Friesian dairy herd, a 265ha contract-managed arable unit and a flock of 250 North Country mules.

Paul explained to groups of visitors how he and his team had improved the carbon footprint of the dairy herd while cutting costs and boosting efficiency.

He also set out how the farm had installed and manage a 44kW slurry-fed, anaerobic digester plant.

Visitor responses highlighted the farm walk, informative sessions and the chance to network as reasons why they plan to attend next year's event. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

1. Solicitor Julie Robinson of Roythornes quizzes the panel from the floor
2. Standing room only - seminars were so popular that some visitors listened from the outside

3. Visitors were able to catch up with speakers and discuss practical issues
4. Attendees took advantage of a tour of Cambridge University's Park Farm
5. Cambridge University farm manager Paul Kelly talks through the robot

6. Lunch offered a chance to relax in the sunshine
7. Food and refreshments were available during breaks
8. Steve Barclay, then Defra minister, listened to farmer concerns after addressing a packed audience

How big business can bolster farm income

Private funding can be a lucrative source of extra revenue, but it's important that farmers look before they leap, say experts

Private companies looking to improve their environmental credentials are increasingly willing to pay farms to switch to more sustainable farming methods, according to experts on the panel at a recent *Farmers Weekly* seminar.

Will Strong explained that public goods include water and air, carbon, soil, and social benefits, such as access to amenity areas that can aid mental health and wellbeing. He suggested there was a wide range of potential companies that could be interested in funding change to these goods on farms such as developers, utility firms, retailers, food and grain processors, transport companies, banks and energy providers.

Harvey Davies added that finance and investment companies – or even wealthy philanthropists wanting to do their bit for the environment – could also be potential funding sources.

Explaining how the funding could work, Sarah Belton highlighted biodiversity net gain (BNG) units, carbon credits and nutrient neutrality schemes. She explained that the driver for nutrient neutrality was a requirement for new con-

struction projects to avoid increasing nitrogen and phosphorus in the local environment.

Farmers signing up to the scheme are paid to reduce water pollution and protect wildlife areas to balance out the impact of the development.

The potential market

The market is potentially lucrative. Sarah quoted a case study of a colleague who trades BNG units at £25,000-£30,000 each, with 6 units/ha. However, the panel stressed that despite headline figures for funding markets, there was a great deal of uncertainty over their wide-scale and long-term potential.

Private sources vary between areas, and the market may be limited in some locations. Harvey pointed out that offsets for construction represented only a small market, with the total UK area only being a few hundred hectares a year.

Ben Makowiecki said that applied to the whole private funding market, which was dogged by uncertainty and reticence. It is a fledgling market and there is a lack of understanding and trust, Ben said. Farmers and growers are hanging back to see how it develops and watch others take the first steps. But despite the uncertainty, the panel stressed it was still important to be prepared.

Starting point

Richard Maryniak said that while there is not yet a lot of material delivery, the markets would come, and so it was important to be ready.

As a key member of a farming cluster, Richard advised that farmers and growers were better off working together to attract private funding. Cluster members have the advice, support and experience of like-minded farmers in a similar location. They also have more clout when making bids for schemes.

Regardless of being in a cluster, he said to start with a review of the farm and research, as well as analysing private markets available using web searches and contacting advisory services that

specialise in this type of venture. The panel put forward sites where information is available, including the Green Finance Institute and searching the term “nutrient neutral” on the Defra website.

Ben suggested the Soil Association Exchange that worked for the whole industry, not just organic farmers. Will added that companies such as Frontier had specialists and advisers to help identify funding sources. Richard pointed to farmerclusters.com as a starting point.

With the research started, the farm itself should be reviewed and its potential assets noted, such as woodland expansion, amenity ventures and soil, water and air quality improvements. Baseline must then be carried out.

Possible pitfalls

Payments are based on the amount of quantifiable improvements to the environment, a process known as additionality, said Ben. If work goes ahead before baselining, there won't be a way of measuring the improvement or securing agreements. It's essential to have the farm baselined, said Sarah.

Legally, it is important to recognise that private agreements differ from government schemes in duration, said Harvey. While a government scheme normally runs for up to 10 years, nutrient neutrality can be 30-120 years.

Land constraints will operate for this entire period, and markets may change considerably over the years. The agreement holder must also demonstrate genuine additional environmental change, or risk breaching the contract. These constraints could degrade land value, and there are setup, legal and ongoing management costs. ■

EXPERT PANEL

Transition Project editor and webinar host Johann Tasker was joined by five experts to discuss issues on private funding sources for public goods, including potential rewards, commitment and how to start the process.

- **Sarah Belton** Founder/director of Nutrient Neutral
- **Ben Makowiecki** Agricultural sustainability director at Lloyds Bank
- **Richard Maryniak** Partner at the Aqualate Estate
- **Harvey Davies** Solicitor on Things' planning and environment team
- **Will Strong** Commercial sustainability specialist at Frontier Agriculture

WATCH THE WEBINAR

Watch the discussion in full at fwi.co.uk/transition, where you'll also find the other webinars in the Transition series

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Collaboration

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Data and tools

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