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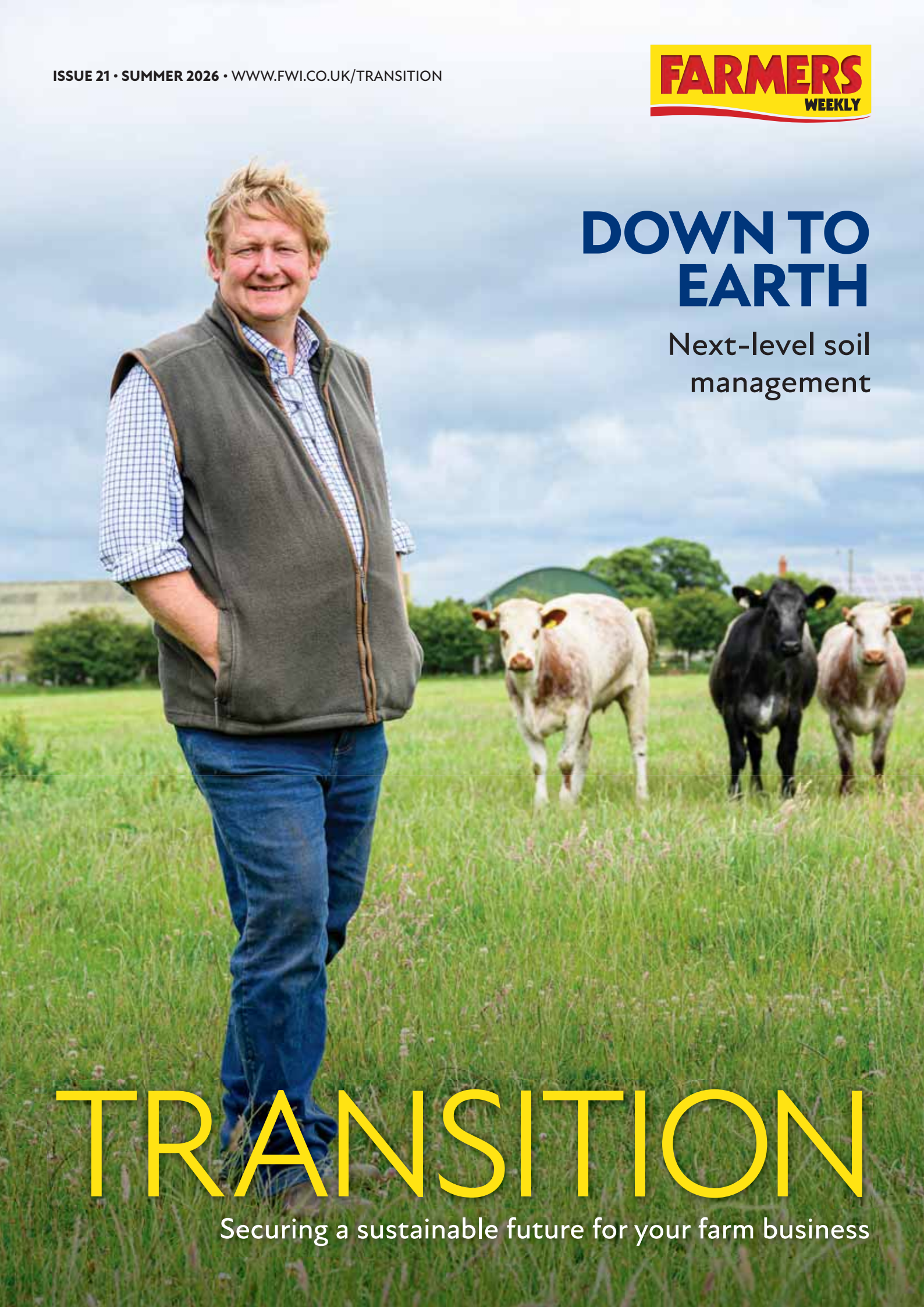
FARMERS WEEKLY



DOWN TO EARTH

Next-level soil management

TRANSITION

Securing a sustainable future for your farm business

How climate-proofing your farm can boost the balance sheet

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

With multiple heatwaves this summer, this issue looks at farmers who have implemented practical measures to protect their businesses from climate change – not just scorching temperatures, but other weather challenges too. We look at ways to make the Sustainable Farming Incentive work on your farm – and how to decide the best options for you. And we ask Scotland's farmers about the measures they have adopted for environmental focus areas.

Our newest Transition Farmer explains the wide range of tools and systems he uses – including a microscope to assess changes in the soil and make adjustments to ensure it is in peak condition to support crops and livestock.

On the business side, two of our Transition Partners have offered a fresh take to cutting costs through contracting partnerships – an approach that could wipe thousands off a farm business's bills.

As always, we'd like to thank our Transition Farmers for sharing their winning strategies and the pitfalls to avoid. We're also grateful to our Transition Partners for sharing their expertise, and invaluable advice. This is especially so at such a busy time of year – and I'd like to wish you all a happy harvest.

For more about our Transition initiative, and farm management advice, please do 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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MAIN PHOTO: GNP

CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS

How a dairy farm cut their costs by two thirds

Geo Green Power installed a 210kWp solar array at Bluebell Dairy slashing energy bills, satisfying major supply chain climate demands, and highlighting further ways dairy farms can cut carbon.

Running a modern dairy enterprise is energy-intensive at the best of times, but when milking cows is combined with manufacturing artisan ice cream and operating a busy farm park, the electricity meter rarely stops spinning. At Bluebell Dairy in Derbyshire, the business faced a double challenge: escalating operating costs and an urgent need to improve its environmental footprint to satisfy key supply chain partners.

At the heart of Bluebell Dairy's diversification is its ice cream production, which means commercial freezers and cold storage units must run 24/7. This creates a significant, non-negotiable base power load. At the same time, major partners such as the National Trust and National Heritage began requesting clear evidence of green credentials within their supply chains. It became clear that doing nothing was no longer an option, either for profit margins or wholesale contracts.

To tackle this head-on, Bluebell Dairy invested in a Geo Green Power installed 210.5kWp solar PV system. Because the farm's highest energy demand coincides with the summer ice cream peak and daytime farm park operations, solar was a natural fit. The system generates around 188,128 kWh of clean electricity annually, offsetting approximately 47 tonnes of carbon emissions each year.

The financial transition has been remarkable. The solar array is on track to shave up to two-thirds off the farm's total energy bill. With the current cost of grid electricity, Bluebell Dairy is projecting a full capital payback period of just four to five years. For any farm looking at long-term resilience, locking in on-site generation offers a secure buffer against volatile energy markets.

Going beyond solar to trim dairy costs

While solar has been Bluebell Dairy's biggest win, achieving a truly efficient, low-carbon dairy unit requires looking at the whole farm ecosystem. For dairy businesses looking to trim operating costs, there are several highly effective areas to target:

Milk Heat Recovery Systems

Cooling milk from 37°C down to 4°C releases an enormous amount of thermal energy. By installing a heat recovery unit on bulk tank compressors, farms can capture this excess heat and use it to pre-heat water up to 50°C. Since dairy parlours require large volumes of hot water for wash-downs and plant cleaning, this simple transfer can cut water-heating bills by over 50%.

Variable Speed Drives (VSDs):

Conventional vacuum and milk pumps operate at a constant, maximum speed regardless of actual demand. Fitting a VSD allows the pump motor to slow down or speed up based on real-time vacuum requirements during milking. This can reduce the electricity consumed by a milking plant by up to 40% and extend the lifespan of machinery.

LED Parlour Lighting

Livestock buildings and milking parlours require long hours of bright illumination to support stockmanship and safety. Swapping out old fluorescent tubes for smart, moisture-resistant LED lighting can pay for itself rapidly, drawing a fraction of the power while improving working conditions.

Slurry Management and Covers

Methane emissions from slurry stores represent both an environmental challenge and a lost opportunity. Covering slurry lagoons not only prevents rainwater from diluting valuable organic fertiliser - saving on dirty water pumping and spreading costs - but also creates the infrastructure needed to capture gases. On larger units, small-scale anaerobic digestion can turn that waste directly into on-farm heat and power. Transitioning to a lower-carbon business is not just about ticking an eco-friendly box; it is about future-proofing the farm. Generating its own power has given Bluebell Dairy more predictable running costs, protected its commercial wholesale relationships, and helped ensure the family farm remains resilient for the next generation.

To find out more email
info@geogreenpower.com

Geo Green Power

Meet our Transition Farmers

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

Beth Speakman
Essex

Farm size 275ha

Enterprises
Mixed arable, beef and sheep

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

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
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
P56
Fife

Farm size 138ha

Enterprises
Potatoes, brussels sprouts, parsnips, malting barley

Transition goals
- Reduce cultivations
- Improve soil health
- More resilient rotations

Andrew McFadzean
P59
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
Devon

Farm size 161ha

Enterprises
300-cow dairy herd

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

Lucy Eyre
Welshpool

Farm size 51ha

Enterprises
Cattle and sheep

Transition goals
- Striking the right balance of livestock numbers
- Reduce inputs and maximise the use of grass
- Re-establish direct meat sales

Eddie Andrew
P59
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
P62
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
P62
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
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

Tom Fairfax
P44
Northumberland

Farm size 475ha

Enterprises
Winter and spring wheat, short-term leys, Aberdeen Angus and Shorthorn cattle, Texel, Suffolk and Exlana sheep, agroforestry

Transition goals
- Rebuilding the productive power of the soil
- Enhancing agroforestry around the estate in a holistic, whole-farm approach
- Creating a local food hub

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

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BARCLAYS
Backing your future

Farmers explain how they have tackled climate threat

Extended dry periods, storms, flooding and higher temperatures all occur more frequently, disrupting business. As the risks become clear an increasing number of farmers and growers are taking action to make their businesses more resilient. Here, we ask four farmers how they have responded to challenges from storms, high temperatures, drought and flooding and ask experts for tips.

STORMS

Deepdale Farm, Burnham Deepdale, Norfolk

Disaster struck Deepdale Farm after rain lashed the 300ha arable unit throughout the winter of 2019. For decades, the farm had been run conventionally, growing root crops on some large sloping fields. The rain had been relentless through the winter and continued into 2020 so the ground was saturated, says farm manager Anna Biesty. Then a deluge hit us and the soil simply couldn't hold on anymore; it just started to move, she says.

One of the biggest fields was an uninterrupted slope, 1km long, that ran down towards the local village and flowing water quickly carved snaking gulleys 2ft deep and 3ft wide. The mud and water was a threat to the river Burn, a chalk stream that flows into habitat-rich salt marsh, so Norfolk Rivers Trust (NRT) intervened to minimise the impacts. NRT's emergency team responded quickly, arriving with excavators and earth-movers to build banks across the field and a soakaway to contain some of the water. But the damage and ongoing vulnerability made it clear decisive action was needed to ensure it could never happen again. The biggest decision was to take

Anna Biesty

60% of the farmed area out of production and put it into a Countryside Stewardship Scheme agreement. "It sounds drastic but we needed breathing space and an income to work out a more resilient strategy," says Anna.

To help ensure the agreement was approved, the farm switched to organic production. "Working with Norfolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group [Fwag], we designed a Mid Tier CSS agreement that started in Jan 2021," says Anna. Options chosen included wild birdseed mixes and flower-rich margins and plots. Meanwhile, NRT extended its support by funding hedge and woodland planting, cover crops and wild flowers. It also carried out soil testing and surface flow and erosion mapping. Other measures introduced were beetle banks across the sloping fields and hedgerow planting to reduce run-off while ditches and bunds were created to direct water from future downpours. Fields were split into 5ha plots and beetle banks created, although the divisions weren't made permanent to allow flexibility for future strategies.

A test of the work came when extreme rainfall hit the farm again in late 2023. "Roads and villages around us were flooded in places, but I could walk the fields without getting my boots muddy – it was a stark contrast to 2020," Anna says.

The stewardship agreement was rolled over but will end in 2027. After six years, the soil will have been brought back into a resilient state and >

MENTAL RESILIENCE

Anna, a Nature Friendly Farming Network champion, suggests that working with other farmers has been key to her own resilience. Anna and her siblings took over the farm in difficult circumstances, shortly after their father died.

"We are part of the North Norfolk Coast Cluster Group and have had huge support from Fwag and NRT in remodelling our farm. I would urge anyone concerned about their farm's future to work together to help share the mental stresses and strains," Anna says.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DEEPDALE FARM, NFFN, ELVEDENFARMS, MICHAEL SARGENT, DEEPDALE FARM

the cropping will be extended to cover 85-90% of the original land area. Cover crops, margins and beetle banks will remain, to ensure flood risks are minimised.

FLOOD

Shanaghan Farm, County Down, Northern Ireland

Louise Skelly manages Shanaghan Farm, a 40ha sheep unit in County Down where she has lived for the past 40 years. The farm is a moderate-sized unit among NI's much smaller average farm size, points out Louise. Over that time, and particularly in recent years, she has witnessed an increase in flooding with extreme events occurring more frequently.

Parts of the farm have flooded for the first time since I've been here, she says. In 2023, some areas were underwater to depths of more than 5ft, even the gates were submerged, she says. And between August and December that year, the farm was flooded 13 times.


Louise Skelly

"There was no denying it, the flooding was definitely getting worse and adding extra difficulty to running a grass-based system," says Louise. "We rely heavily on our grazing. Concentrate is only fed in small amounts as a booster to ewes carrying twins or triplets and to ensure ewes have good-quality colostrum.

"The main driver for our strategy is to produce 100% grass-fed lambs and when the flooding started to encroach, we had to take action," she says.

One way was to improve soil drainage and aeration by reducing compaction. Key to that, was using lighter machinery and switching to RTVs for some field work, with weed control via weed wiper rather than a boom sprayer. A shift to mob-grazing is also a key strategy. Electric fencing and portable water troughs have been introduced and sheep are moved daily, on rotation. This reduces pressure on the soil and grass, allowing it to recover more quickly and produce stronger root structures, explains Louise.

Ploughing has been dropped in preference to over-sowing leys. This again reduces the machinery tonnage. It also creates a wider variety mix with diverse root lengths to produce a better soil profile. Longer-rooted grass varieties were also introduced to absorb and hold more water while creating a better structure deeper down. As an NFFN member this goes hand-in-hand with a policy to cut artificial fertiliser use and a switch to sources that add organic matter and nutrients like seaweed to improve the soil microbiology and its ability to drain and retain water.

A further move to improve resilience has been tree planting with more than 3,000 strategically sited to help drainage, reduce erosion and retain moisture. Flood-tolerant tree species like willow and alder have been planted along river banks to cut erosion while rowans, oak and crab apple improve micronutrients and soil structure around fields. For the same reason, the farm's hedgerows have been allowed to grow higher and broader.

It all helps improve the soil condition which is visibly improving, says Louise.

HOW WATER COMPANIES ARE HELPING

Farmers and water companies such as Anglian Water are increasingly working together to combat the effects of flooding and sudden heavy rainfall. One of the key changes we are seeing is increasing levels of nitrates in surface water and this is a big problem, says Chris Hewis, Anglian Water Services catchment adviser.

"We don't yet know whether the increase is due to more intense rainfall from urban or farm run-off, but whatever the source turns out to be, it is major, developing issue. Surface water containing a high concentration of nitrates can't be put into large drinking water reservoirs as the cost of removal treatment is prohibitive, meaning this water is lost from the system and allowed to go out to sea. From farming's perspective, these lost nutrients are a wasted investment so we have a common goal – to withhold these nutrients from water by improving the resilience of the soil, says Chris.

Anglian Water offers advice and funding to support farmers to transition to soils with higher organic matter content and better microbiology to help retain the nutrients in the field. Soil scanning and mapping, cover crop planting, soil sensor installation or making the transition to strip tillage are examples of projects which have attracted up to £7500 support through Anglian Water's Farm Innovation Grant, when available in key areas.

The main focus is improving soil health to help retain moisture and reduce erosion. But Anglian Water is also encouraging the construction of landscape features, points out Chris. These include scrapes, to interrupt the water movement from fields and on-farm ponds and reservoirs to manage flows and act as storage.

DROUGHT

Elveden Farms, Suffolk

In one of the UK's driest areas on light soil, water is an issue and climate change a growing threat. Andrew Blenkiron runs the 4,500ha Elveden Farms in Suffolk, which grows root crops and cereals. The farm is on a Breckland sandy soil with a chalk base. "It can grow anything and we could harvest any single day of the year, providing there is enough water in the growing season," says Andrew.

Water supply is via abstraction licences for 2.8m cu m drawn from the river Lark and nine boreholes. The estate also had two existing reservoirs to retain and supply water. But, even with this combined resource, the increasingly extreme weather and tighter abstraction rules were seen as a threat. "The weather has definitely changed. We face more frequent rainfall extremes with 30mm-plus in a day and more periods where monthly rainfall is negligible," says Andrew.

Increasingly there are extended dry periods and higher temperatures putting pressure on crop growth. And, for a number of years, Environment Agency policy appears to have been shifting towards reducing abstraction licences which could also threaten production, he adds. It was clear we had to build more resilience into our setup and funding was sought for a third reservoir, says Andrew.

The third 500,000cu m reservoir was completed last year with 30% of the cost provided by a Defra grant. The reservoir is filled from the river when flow rates are high enough, explains Andrew, who notes this valuable resource would otherwise have been lost to the sea. "We have made ourselves more resilient and done our bit to reduce urban flooding downstream," he says.

Attention has now turned to a pipework upgrade for the 180-mile long network that supports the irrigation systems. Other efficiency upgrades introduced, include soil moisture sensors to provide real-time data for software that controls pumps and irrigators, ensuring rates are optimised. Power for some of the pumps is provided by solar panels sited close to the boreholes. There's also a significant number of panels on store roofs and proposals for a floating

array on one of the reservoirs. Other initiatives include joining forces with local farmers and Water Resources East in research trials aimed at delivering even greater efficiency of water use.

HEAT

White House Farm, Ashford, Kent

Higher temperatures and more frequent spells of hot weather have prompted action on a Kent dairy farm. White House Farm, near Ashford, is managed by Peter Sargent in partnership with his parents Michael and Rosemary. The 210 pedigree Jersey milkers calve year-round with Angus genetics used to produce a beef finisher herd.

While dry cows, calves and beef cattle, graze across the 222ha platform, milkers have been moved indoors, year-round. The move wasn't specifically due to the changing climate explains Peter, although grass growth and quality on the Wealden clay was increasingly under pressure because of weather extremes. The main reasons were to maximise the efficiency of the farm's robot milkers and improve yields with higher quality forage. But periods of hot weather have become more extended and frequent, with temperatures inside the housing often above 30C. The flush-wash and separator also added to the humidity levels inside the housing.

"The knock-on effect during the hot weather, was lower fertility, and an increase in lameness, mastitis and yield drops," reports Peter. Cows were spending more time on their feet and grouping up in the alleyways, while flies were an increasing nuisance, he says.

"We had to do something to better control the environment so made use of the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund to support the purchase of six 72in VES-Artex fans and two 50in blast fans."

The six VES-Artex fans have been mounted 1.5m above the cubicle runs while the blast fans are sited directly in front of the robot milkers.

Andrew Blenkiron

Peter Sargent

Further support was sourced via a Countryside Stewardship scheme capital grant to construct a roof over the feed barriers to maintain quality. The effect of the changes has been significant.

"Fans operate from 20C and in the past two heatwaves we have seen less standing and no grouping at all. Even with the outside temperature at 34C, cows are content and not showing any signs of stress," Peter says. "There has been no significant drop in milk yield, feed intakes have been maintained and lameness has declined because cows spend less time on their feet," he adds. Another benefit has been a reduction in flies, particularly outside the robot milkers, where the blast fans have all but eliminated the problem. "Ultimately, we have far greater control over the conditions in the shed so welfare and production have benefited," Peter concludes. ■

DAIRY HOT WEATHER ADVICE

Hot weather is a major concern for dairy cows because health, welfare and production can all suffer if strategic changes are not made to mitigate the risk, says consultant Ben Watts at Kite Consulting.

A dairy cow may start to suffer heat stress in temperatures of just 20C, but there are a lot of things that we can do to help, says Ben. There is a wide range of fan types but whatever the type, the aim is to increase air movement over the cows to allow them to dissipate heat from their body surfaces, says Ben. Soakers, to spray water over the cows in collecting yards, are another efficient method of dissipating heat from body surfaces through evaporation. But high humidity is also a factor in heat stress, making it more difficult for animals to breathe. Therefore, soakers must be used in conjunction with a fan and professional advice," says Ben. There are a number of management strategies that can also be employed. For example, where fans are used the cows can be housed comfortably during the day and allowed out at night to graze.

Ration tweaks can help to ease the effects of heat, too, Ben adds. Panting and drooling reduce the amount of saliva reaching the rumen so acidosis risks increase. It is advisable to buffer rations with buffers like sodium bicarbonate, acid buff, magnesium oxide (a rumen alkaliser) and limestone flour, he suggests. Heat stressed cows also suffer mineral losses so amino acid additives like Betaine will help cells regulate and retain water, limiting gut inflammation and helping to protect liver function, Ben says.

FURTHER HELP

- Rabi
Wellbeing support **0800 188 4444**
- Rsabi
Wellbeing support (Scotland)
0808 1234 555
- Catchment Sensitive Farming
Offers free advice on water issues
farmingadviceservice.org.uk/csf
- Anglian Water
Offers advice and grants for projects that will help to improve water quality in the East of England
www.anglianwater.co.uk
- Water Resources East
Has published a comprehensive guide to reservoir development **wre.org.uk**

Soil system focus returns farm to profit

Attention to detail underpins our new Northumberland-based Transition Farmer's strategy. **Jonathan Riley** reports

TRANSITION GOALS

- Rebuilding the soil's productive power
- Whole-farm approach to enhancing agroforestry
- Creating a local food hub

Tom Fairfax and wife Miki farm the 473ha Mindrum Estate in the foothills of the Cheviot Hills, close to the Scottish border. The farm runs a 100-head suckler herd of Aberdeen Angus Shorthorn crosses and a closed flock of about 1,000 Texel cross Suffolk mules. Exlana genetics are being introduced as Tom considers switching to low-input, outdoor lambing.

The farm also has 48ha of woodland shelterbelt and 120ha of mixed arable on mainly sandy loams. The transition from a conventionally run mixed farm to a regenerative, organic system, began about six years ago. "Cereal yields had stalled; we were applying more artificial fertiliser each year just to maintain output," says Tom, a Nature Friendly Farming Network member.

"The biodiversity was declining, the soil was getting thin and we were spending more on inputs so margins were falling," he adds. Decades of using artificial inputs had taken a toll on the whole farm system and the business needed a rethink. Tom took part in training, including a Soil Food Web Foundation course that aims to help farmers improve soil microbiology and move away from artificial inputs.

From there he learned to look at nutrient efficiency and soil biology as an enabler for nutrient management across the farming system. This allowed him to look at the impact of inputs at a systemic level and to harness the power of the natural systems in a nutrient cycling model.

It became clear that functional biology was the key to a massive soil nutrient reserve which was previously locked up.

Microscope

A former reconnaissance officer, Tom has used his detailed observation and analysis skills on the farm and widened his approach to incorporate the use of a microscope, reading weeds and other traditional lab-based methods.

The microscope is used alongside a spade to regularly examine the structure, organic matter content and the soil health systems.

"Key is the system's approach rather than a reliance on discrete structural or chemical metrics," he insists. "Incorporating organic matter creates a soil system that retains water, stabilises plant nutrients and enables microbial activity."

The spectrum of processes within a functional soil system create conditions to bring together plants, micro-organisms and soil in a resilient, responsive and flexible system. This drives productivity and buffers shocks. In short, this healthy system does many of the expensive tasks that we previously used, Tom says.

"As a result we no longer need any artificial fertilisers or pesticides so inputs are down, our margins are up and we are in profit for the first time in years," Tom explains.

"Significantly, our livestock growth rates and quality are rising, while our vet bills are down. The soil structure has improved and better supports traffic, widening work windows."

Field work for crops reflects the individual field conditions with min-till and direct-drilling through a green canvas. Perennial ryegrass is a challenge and shallow ploughing (5in depth) is used every three to four years. The impact is monitored under the microscope and it has become clear that establishing an "a horizon" – a biologically active topsoil layer to 12in – allows the system to heal itself when only a few inches are disturbed.

"We also monitor total nutrient composition, to access nutrient reserves which can be converted by our managed biology," Tom adds. Findings from the soil tests then guide which fields will take a crop and ambient conditions like temperature are used to advantage.

Drilling takes place at lower temperatures giving the cereals a headstart over the clover and the whole system produces sugary exudates, feeding the soil microbes. A clover/forb mix is spread from a quad bike spinner if a companion layer is required to support the crop. Once the cereal is harvested, the clover flourishes.

A variety of grazing systems is used including set-stocking, rotational, multi-paddock and mob grazing, according to individual field needs. The underlying principle is to move livestock on quickly, to rest swards.

Woodland

One of the Transition goals is to enhance woodland and agroforestry by careful addition to existing tree plots to create shelterbelts for cattle and crops. Mindrum has historically planted shelterbelts on about 15% of the land. Further trees, have been planted on about 14ha at 40-60 trees/ha and 3ha at 20/ha to create silvopasture. This provides shelter for cattle from sun, wind and rain reducing stress and improving production.

The third Transition goal is to create a food hub. Mindrum has begun to produce meat boxes and a local feed system from its own stock and is considering introducing a vending machine system. ■

● See p39 for more on our Transition Farmers

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LLOYDS

Advice on preparing for September's SFI26 application window

Farmers in England have been urged to prepare for the Sustainable Farming Incentive's application window. **Louise Impey** looks at how to be ready

The Sustainable Farming Incentive 2026 has now been opened to applications from smaller farms and those without a current Environmental Land Management (ELM) agreement for almost a month, following last year's abrupt closure of the scheme and subsequent changes made to the offer.

Out of a total £240m budget confirmed for SFI26, some £60m was made available for this first window, with Defra unveiling the application process and budget allocation as simpler, fairer and more accessible.

Stressing that it is spreading the money and targeting family farms to give them greater certainty, Defra pointed out that any funding not allocated through the first window will be added to the budget for the second window, which is open to all farmers and starts in September. The eligibility for the June window is narrow, experts claim, making the second window the key application timing for most farm businesses.

Preparing for September

There is no official date for the opening of the September window, but it is already being predicted as a likely stampede, given the budget. If an average SFI26 agreement has a value of £50,000, the pot allows for just 4,800 new agreements – meaning that it is unlikely to last very long. Put another way, it will leave the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) unable to fund more than half of the existing environmental support schemes due to end in the application period, given that there are 13,000 Countryside Stewardship agreements ending in December 2026 and 4,000 existing SFI agreements ending between September and December 2026.

With no indication of whether there will be future versions of SFI and the lack of forward projections and budgets for the next two to three years, there are understandable concerns being voiced across the industry. Geoff Sansome, former head of agriculture at Natural England, explains that the budget allocated to SFI26 is equivalent to that of Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) at its peak 20 years ago.

"Growers received £60/ha when ELS was

SFI26: QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Does the action fit the rotation and farming system?
- What will it cost to establish?
- What income is being foregone to do this action?
- Does it work with existing agreements?
- What are the long-term benefits of this action?
- Can it be delivered with existing labour and machinery?

PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM SCRIVENER, JASON BYE, JOANNE COATES

SFI26 – KEY CHANGES

- Maximum funding cap of £100,000
- No increase to rotational action areas allowed
- Only one SFI26 agreement per SBI
- 71 actions available, down from 103
- Endorsed action GRH6 (species rich grassland) removed
- Payment rate decreases on legume fallow, herbal leys and winter bird food
- Unharvested cereal headland restricted to 24m
- Payments for plans and soil testing removed
- Moorland grazing payments increased
- Enhanced overwinter stubble restricted to 25%
- Zero insecticide action no longer permissible on maize
- No five-year actions

Claydon strip tillage

operational. When the SFI launched eight years ago, the premise was that it would be open to everyone with a rolling application window. "Now we've had a very short finite first window with strict criteria and thousands of would-be applicants for the second window who are likely to fall outside of the timescales.

What to do now

Natalie Gaibani, head of farming at Strutt & Parker, advises farmers that there are things they can do now to prepare for the September window opening. With the budget expected to come under significant pressure, submitting applications promptly could be critical, she believes, so getting held up by administration issues can be avoided with a bit of office time.

"The first action is administration-based: check maps are up to date on the RPA portal and there's nothing blocking land parcels that may be included in a new application," she says. This is something farmers checked as part of their annual Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) claim.

"With BPS now gone, that routine has disappeared so unless farmers have updated their details for other reasons, they may find that their RPA records and maps are out of date." Common problems are digital maps showing incorrect land cover and land use for each land parcel, or maps not showing all the land parcels you want to include. These are the sort of issues which need fixing to avoid delays before applying for SFI26.

"If a land parcel is incorrectly recorded as permanent grassland, for example, and you want to apply for an arable option, then the system won't allow it. "In the same way, land incorrectly shown as temporary grass will need the land use updating if you want to apply for the no insecticides on arable crops action. The land cover and land use must reflect the situation on the ground."

Requests to add land or make changes to maps can be made online or using RLE1 form. Other checks worth making include ensuring that the contact email address held by the RPA is up to date and the correct permissions have been assigned to your agent if you want them to resolve errors and apply on your behalf. The second action is more strategic, she says. "Decide what your purpose is with any agreement. Farmers need to plan for the long-term, so using the SFI to help with a permanent shift in farming methods makes sense."


Millet being grown for bird food

As money isn't guaranteed beyond the current scheme, applicants should be clear about what sort of farm system they want to have in five to 10 years' time. "If you're seeing an erosion in yields and soils are depleted, you can't continue like that. Having a plan will help to address some of the issues most farms face."

That plan may need to cover challenges such as coping with climate change, making changes to crop choices, managing water and integrating livestock, as well as how to develop a more regenerative and resilient farming system, she suggests. "Unfortunately the SFI is only for three years, when farmers must think much longer term than that. While its short-term nature undermines strategic thinking, it's what we have to work with and we should use it accordingly."

Natalie accepts that the funding is unlikely to be sufficient for the number of applications expected. "Don't plan for next year on the assumption that you will get an SFI26 agreement," she recommends. On that basis, businesses need to have more than one plan – plan A for where an application is successful and plan B for where it isn't, with a possible plan C too given recent volatility. Plan B might include the odd field of unfunded fallow, notes Natalie, but for most farms the choice of not drilling crops isn't an option.

"There are lower input and alternative crops available, as well as spring crops, which reduce the need for expensive inputs and allow farmers to change how they are farming. "For most arable farms, wheat will still be a mainstay, even where premiums are very low or non-existent."

She believes that the SFI budget allocated to the September window could go almost overnight, as there has been no guidance on how applications will be prioritised or whether there will be more funding next year. For now, the company is assuming that it will be on a first-come, first-served basis.

"Defra has committed to publishing updates on how much of the budget has been allocated, so we will be alerted to when 25%, 50% and 75% has gone."

Martin Lines, chief executive of the Nature Friendly farming Network, has a similar view on the expected scramble for new agreements. "It is highly likely that the September SFI26 window will be heavily oversubscribed and Defra needs to see this level of demand for what it is – a desire for urgent change that needs to be met with increased funding for nature-friendly solutions."

He adds that farmers are already experiencing the impacts of climate change. "The government must not let this become a lost opportunity: it must provide the investment that farmers need for a resilient, climate-proof food system."

SFI calculator

Strutt & Parker has developed a calculator that gives indicative costs for each of the SFI actions, so that its clients can assess the financial benefit of a new agreement. Farmers can provide actual costs for use in the calculator, reveals Natalie, making the output relevant for their individual situation.

"Send us an idea of what you are thinking about with a new SFI agreement and we can put it through our calculator, so that any lost revenue from core farming activities becomes clear as well as any financial benefit." Having run a couple of scenarios through the calculator, there >

EXPIRING AGREEMENTS

In a change to the current system, Defra has indicated that farmers with existing agreements (SFI, CS and HLS) that are due to expire soon may be able to prepare an application for the new scheme before their existing agreements expire. Up until now, that hasn't been possible – with SFI26 actions being incompatible with what's already in place, so that Defra doesn't pay twice for actions on the same land or double-fund. Having listened to concerns, it has now announced that it is developing functionality within the application service to allow farmers to apply for land that is already covered, before their schemes expire. As such, it should allow a seamless transition into a new scheme as the current one ends. This is expected to be in place as window 2 opens in September. The move has been greeted with enthusiasm as it will allow farm businesses to keep on delivering the environmental improvements without disrupting cashflows and rotations.

< are already some learnings that can help to fine-tune applications, she adds. "For a small arable farm, the calculator highlights that entering the scheme takes a lot of effort for little reward." For those, she suggests that the focus should be on the less productive and marginal areas, rather than ground that is serving the farm well.

"Cover crops need consideration, too. Are they complementing your system or detracting from it? They can cause management issues as well as being an investment in soil health and function." On a larger 600ha arable farm, the financial benefit is clearer as the SFI payments help to mitigate any losses from moving to actions such as no-till and zero insecticide. "What we've seen is that moving to these types of action can create issues with weed control and reduce yields, leading to a 15% drop in output. So there is often lost arable revenue which the SFI can help to offset." ■

CASE STUDY: NUTFIELD DAIRY, SURREY

For Matthew Elphick and Betsie Edge, tenant farmers and members of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, the Sustainable Farming Incentive is working very well on a smaller farm. They have an SFI24 agreement, having just managed to get their application for their regenerative farm approved before the sudden cut-off last March. "We were one of the lucky ones," says Matthew. "It has helped to replace what we used to receive in BPS and allowed us to make plans at a very uncertain time. "The abrupt closure of the scheme took everyone by surprise, so it's good news for all farms that it is re-opening."

Repeat customers

With 25 cows on 21ha, the couple process all the milk produced by the herd and sell it direct to the public, mainly through a converted milk float that operates as a mobile farm shop. They also make cheese and yogurt and have just invested in a soft serve ice cream maker. That complements their 400l milk dispenser and display fridges containing cheese and yogurt, with many repeat customers visiting the shop every week. "We sell almost all of our milk in this way – if there's any left, it is used to make cheese the next day." The milk float is 'open' three times a week – Monday mornings, Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays, 10am-4pm.

The farm's location near Redhill in Surrey means there are plenty of consumers on their doorstep. The SFI has validated what they were doing, he adds. Having already put the focus on soil health, they farm regeneratively and have chosen Shorthorn and Guernsey cows, both breeds which thrive on a pasture-based diet. Input use is very low, with no bagged nitrogen fertiliser used at all. Biodiversity is thriving and the grazing cows are helping with carbon sequestration and climate change mitigation. In terms of their SFI agreement, half of the farm is in the low input grassland action, while the other half is in herbal leys, reveals Matthew. "They echo what we were doing already. It is disappointing to see that the payment rate for herbal leys has come down for new applicants, as they are working very well." He is also being rewarded for soil testing in his current agreement – but recognises that is now outside the scope of the scheme. There are no other dairies in Surrey selling their own milk and not many micro dairies in the country, reveals Matthew.

Gamechanger

"Having the quarterly income from SFI has been useful but it was the move to the converted milk float that was the gamechanger and made us a viable business." This year, they are intending to make good use of the capital grants offer to put in 1000m of hedgerows and upgrade their muck storage to include a covered yard and some concreting. "We are now in a position where we can re-invest and develop the business," he says. "Having certainty is really important – farming is a long-term business."

Matthew Elphick

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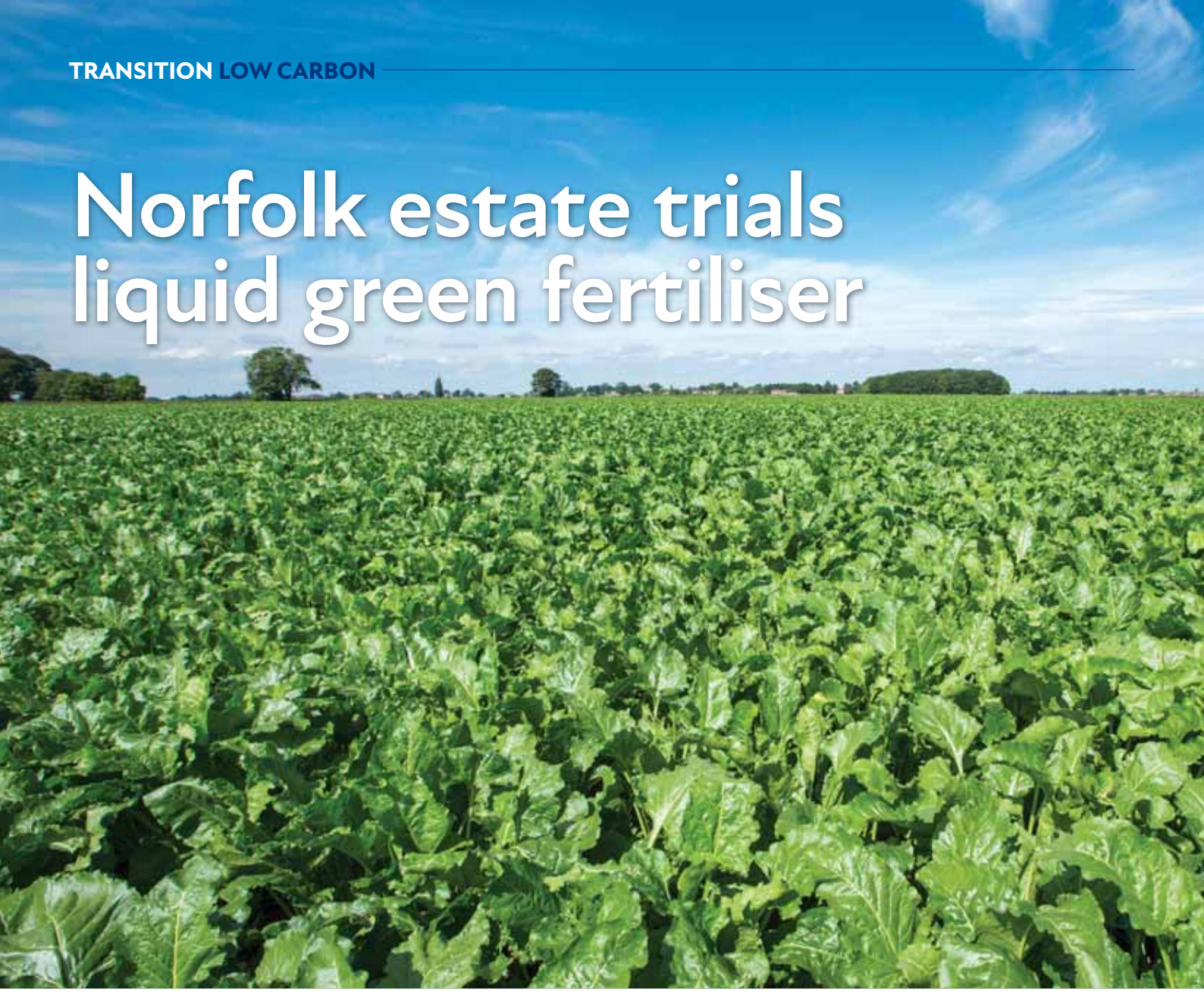
The biodiversity experts

Norfolk estate trials liquid green fertiliser



A field of sugar beet is the first UK crop to be grown using low carbon liquid fertiliser. **Johann Tasker** reports on a potential breakthrough for growers

A heavy tanker pulls into the yard at the Holkham Estate in north Norfolk. It looks just like any other delivery of liquid fertiliser, but it marks what could be a significant step towards decarbonising the food supply chain.

The Holkham Farming Company is conducting the UK's first field-scale trial of liquid green fertiliser. Undertaken in partnership with Omex Agriculture, it forms a key part of the estate's wider goal of becoming carbon negative by 2040.


David Booty

Holkham is growing a 14ha crop of sugar beet using the company's LoC Green fertiliser – a product that includes ammonia made using renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power rather than from fossil fuels. Success will help Holkham unlock a market where premium arable prices are increasingly linked to lower carbon footprints – placing the estate at the forefront of a sector under pressure to demonstrate measurable environmental progress.

LoC Green fertiliser is chemically identical to conventional or "grey" fertiliser. But because the energy source is green, its carbon footprint is 70% lower, says David Booty, Omex head of research and development. "It's exactly like the green energy market, where you buy renewable electricity," he says.

"The end-product is exactly the same – but the processes used during production are much more environmentally friendly than conventional alternatives."

Performance concerns

The Holkham trial aims to allay any concerns that "green" products underperform agronomically. The goal is to demonstrate that 120kg of low-carbon nitrogen will deliver the same output as 120kg of standard grey nitrogen. Holkham farming director James Beamish is using the LoC fertiliser as the cornerstone of the estate's sugar beet nutrition programme. Doing so will provide valuable insights and data in comparison to traditional fertiliser application, he says.

"The real driver of our carbon footprint is nitrogen fertiliser," says Mr Beamish. "About 85% of the estate's carbon emissions are from farming and food production – and about half of those emissions are tied directly to fertiliser. Reducing them is a significant investment – but we believe it's an investment worth making."

Lower yields are not an option. To be viable, the numbers must stack up financially, not just environmentally. Nitrogen fertiliser typically accounts for approximately half the total yield – contributing between 45% and 75% of a crop's total carbon footprint. Roughly half of these emissions occur during fertiliser manufacturing. The other half happens during field application.

There is little doubt that green fertiliser is more environmentally friendly. But it is also a much more expensive option.

PHOTOGRAPHY: OMEX, JASON BYE

STUDY EXPLORES POTENTIAL FOR LEGUMES TO REDUCE FERTILISER USAGE

A University of East Anglia study is examining whether reintroducing edible legumes could help reduce fertiliser applications in arable rotations. The project is investigating how beans, peas and lentils could fit alongside wheat, oilseed rape and potatoes in Norfolk farming systems.

Scientists believe they could reduce input costs, improve soil health and increase resilience to climate change. Researchers led by Madalitso Mgunda will assess the commercial and practical barriers to wider adoption by interviewing farmers, processors and other industry stakeholders, alongside analysing climate suitability data.

Overcoming challenges

Ms Mgunda, is a postgraduate researcher at UEA's School of Global Development and recipient of the 2026 Norfolk International Scholarship. She has previously worked with the World Food Programme on legume value chains.

"Extreme heat, spring drought, unseasonal flooding, together with changing disease and pest risks pose a real threat to the agricultural heartlands of East Anglia, Norfolk and the South East – resulting in major yield fluctuations and lost revenue." The research will explore the realities facing Norfolk farmers and the wider supply chain, says Ms Mgunda. It would help identify changes needed to make legume production more viable.

Profitability

While the agronomic benefits of legumes are well-recognised, profitability remains a key issue for many growers. Barriers include fluctuating gross margins, limited markets, variable yields, processing capacity and long-term contracts.

Ms Mgunda says: "Legumes have enormous potential to contribute to more resilient farming systems, healthier diets and lower environmental impacts, but their production remains limited."

Working with researchers at UEA's Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development, the project forms part of wider efforts focused on climate resilience and crop diversification. It is supported by the Royal Norfolk Agricultural Association, the Norwich Institute for Sustainable Development and the JC Mann Charitable Trust.

Barriers to adoption

Cost remains a primary barrier to wider adoption. For a product offering a 70% carbon reduction, in spring of 2026 the green fertiliser premium ranged between £150-£170/t – and margins are already tight across the arable sector. For spring barley, in 2026 liquid green fertiliser added roughly £7.50-£8.50/t of grain produced.

For milling wheat, which requires higher nitrogen rates, the cost rose to £14-£15/t. To bridge this gap, a "hybrid" range has been developed. This blends green and grey formulations to offer a partial carbon reduction at a lower cost. A hybrid product can offer a range of carbon footprint reductions to suit goals and budgets. These hybrid options act as a stepping stone for businesses not yet ready for a full transition. Holkham is absorbing these costs as part of its innovation strategy. Mr Beamish admits the business is lucky to be able to "tinker and play a little bit." But he is clear that the market must eventually support these costs. "I'm not getting paid for the lower carbon yet – but it is a key part of the estate's strategy to reduce emissions. If I'm just purely looking at the bottom of the P&L, grey fertiliser is probably still my direct route."


James Beamish

The trial is also looking at the "other 50%" of emissions – those lost in the field. Even if manufacturing becomes net zero, on-farm losses persist. Techniques such as placement and the use of inhibitors are vital. Using an inhibitor like NOxShield has been proven to reduce "in-field"nitrous oxide emissions by about 50%. For a crop like sugar beet, this represents a 20-30% reduction in total CO2/t of production. This highlights why a holistic approach is necessary.


Laura Wood

Market rewards

The drive for low-carbon farming is increasingly coming from the supply chain. British Sugar has announced it will reward sustainability from 2027. Other partners, like Adnams brewery, are also seeking lower-carbon raw materials. For processors, "Scope 3" emissions – those from the farms they buy from – often represent 95% of their total carbon footprint. Decarbonising the farm is the most effective way for these companies to meet their own climate targets. Educating the entire chain is crucial. If consumers see low-carbon sugar on a shelf, they might be willing to choose it. The Holkham trial will provide the data needed to model the exact cost impact per kilo of sugar. This transparency helps commercial teams from supply chain partners understand the value of the product.

"We're hoping we will be recognised as a forward-thinking innovative estate," that is looking to extend the trial to other crops. Holkham has already purchased another 22t of green fertiliser for next year. This will be trialled across all cereals, including malting barley destined for brewer Adnams. The aim is to supply the brewery with carbon-negative barley.

The next challenge is scaling the technology. To drive down costs, the industry must move beyond small-scale trials to wide-scale adoption. This will require collaboration between growers, processors and fertiliser manufacturers.

While the cost premium is currently a hurdle, the supply chain is gradually starting to explore rewarding those who adopt greener technologies, says Omex business growth director Laura Wood. "It's very scalable," she says.

"Farmers are increasingly looking for ways to reduce their carbon footprint without compromising productivity, and low-carbon fertilisers have the potential to become an important part of that journey. But more support is needed, and supply chains have an important role to play in rewarding growers who take the lead and invest in lower-carbon fertiliser." ■

How to cut fixed costs with innovative restructure

With margins squeezed by higher input costs and lower incomes, experts are pointing to an innovative way of restructuring farm businesses to tackle fixed costs. **Jonathan Riley** finds out more

Diminishing government support and geopolitical upheaval have hit margins, putting pressure on farm businesses to find new ways of transitioning to financial sustainability.

Variable costs are usually the main target when trying to maintain margins because they are easier to cut than fixed costs, which are often tied into complex and sometimes long-standing agreements.

But there is a much bigger variation in the fixed-cost structure between comparable farm businesses and it is often these costs that could become the difference between survival and failure, according to Strutt and Parker director Ian Ashbridge. So it is worth considering the ways that a farm business could get those lumpy fixed costs like borrowing, labour and machinery, off its books, says Ian.

He and Paul Hardman, corporate lawyer at Shakespeare Martineau, believe one way to do that is with a business restructure via a contracting partnership.

This is an innovative option. It can free up capital, reduce fixed costs and create economies of scale while the owner retains control of the farming strategy and the way the work is carried out – an important aim for many working farmers, says Ian.

Typically set up as a limited liability partnership (LLP) agreement, this little-used approach could cut costs and increase efficiency while allowing farmers and growers to retain control of their businesses, Paul suggests. He explains that a contracting partnership is a way of reducing the cost burden by tackling fixed costs.

How it works

The contracting partnership is a joint venture with one or more neighbouring farms. It is born out of the philosophy behind machinery rings where assets are shared and fixed costs reduced. But this joint venture goes further by setting up an entirely separate contracting entity as a limited liability partnership, explains Ian.

Effectively, the farm owners involved operate their own contracting business, which possesses the machinery and labour, and then carries out the work for them.

The new business is a separate entity from the parent farms, which introduce the capital to enable it to carry out the required tasks. It is not a profit-making venture, its sole purpose is to provide all the services to the farms at the lowest cost possible, adds Paul.

The entity has its own accounts so the parent farmers pay a fee based on cost of operating divided by acreage or turnover, he says.

Operationally, it does not go as far as being a co-operative, where all the buying, selling and crop planning are done centrally. Instead, the contracting LLP allows the parent farms to use the centrally held machinery and labour from the new entity, so allowing them to retain control of their own cropping or grazing regimes. It also creates economies of scale.

Machinery

Rather than each farm owning all of the machinery and labour necessary to cover operations, the capital is instead owned by the new entity, which serves the combined acreage of the parent farms involved.

A joint decision on the level and scope of the machinery needed is made by the parent companies at the outset. Parent businesses may sell off equipment or sell it into the new entity to be used across the farms.

The new entity may also buy in appropriate machinery – for example, a new combine – that more efficiently meets the scale and reduces costs across the farms. Whatever the decision, the machinery costs are off the books for the individual units.

Labour

Labour profiling to establish requirements should be carried out to see where the peak needs are for the farms and to identify any overlaps in staff. The overall aim is to find efficiencies and reduce fixed costs. It may make sense for appropriately skilled staff to become employed by the contracting entity directly, suggests Ian.

There are laws governing the transfer of employees to a new business. As the new business is a separate entity it is also a new employer for existing staff. This process is covered by legislation under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Act.

This legislation must be adhered to, he says.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GNP

Alternatively, the parent businesses may keep some staff and second them at peak times according to workflow – for example, calving or harvest times.

Management

While cropping regimes, grazing patterns, buying inputs, selling produce and other strategic planning remain under the control of the farm owners, decisions on machinery and labour operations are carried out centrally.

That means the operations across the farms will require management time. Partnerships operating like this often delegate one of the farmers to take up the role. But an external manager could be employed if no-one has the time or motivation. Whatever the decision, the manager will need an agreed remuneration package under a professionally drawn up contract, Paul points out.

Decisions and direction should then be agreed at regular meetings. Communication is vital between the farmers, with regular meetings, a chairman appointed and minutes taken and agreed on with an agent or adviser present to take an impartial position.

Tax

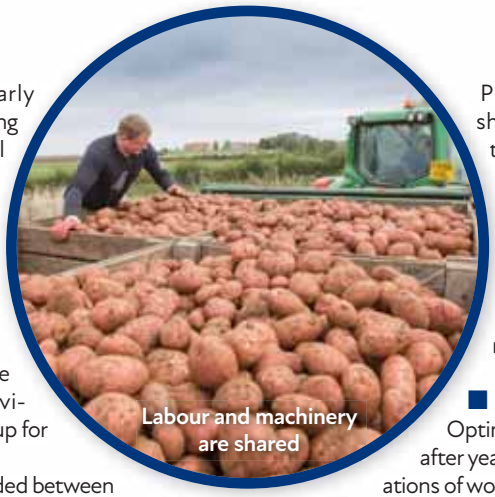
The whole objective of the contracting LLP is to cover costs. In the rare circumstances where the LLP does show a profit, it would typically be reinvested in plant and machinery, if the partners agreed. Alternatively, they would have a rebate against the contract fees they paid.

The LLP itself is not taxed, says Paul, but as ever with tax issues, specific advice on each person's circumstances should be obtained and the structure has wider tax implications that need specialist input before going ahead.

These include VAT on the contracting fees charged to the parent farms, capital allowances and any chargeable gains when machinery is sold into or out of the new entity, and the effect on agricultural and business property relief for inheritance tax – particularly given the reforms capping those reliefs from April 2026.

If it was a company, the company would be taxed. This makes the LLP a more straightforward operation than, say, a limited company, which would remunerate via directors' loans, dividends and a payroll set up for salaries, he says.

Income is instead divided between the parent farm businesses and tax paid according to income standard thresholds.


Labour and machinery are shared

Setting up

While this is a relatively simple, tax-efficient system, it must be set up with input from legal, accountancy and business experts. Although this is a cost, the outlay is minor when the savings made on machinery and labour are taken into account. It is vital that watertight contracts and agreements are in place before going ahead, says Paul. There must be an LLP agreement drawn up by a solicitor.

This should cover who has put in what, based on acreage, turnover, or how much money has been invested. Fee structures for the contracting work must be clearly set out too so there is no dispute once the business is up and running. Any partner farm must be transparent about their current financial and operating status.

The idea is to have equal partners, not to prop up an ailing business, so there needs to be a level of scrutiny, openness and trust applied, Paul says.

For example, if one of the parent farmers wants to leave. There must be an agreement in place for compensation to be paid in lieu of investments made. It should also cover timescales for departures, perhaps, to rule out a parent leaving during harvest time or other disruptive period.

Policy statements should also be agreed that cover any potential points of contention such as operating procedures meeting attendance, remuneration and usage times for the machine.

Key considerations

Opting to work with others after years, maybe even generations of working independently, is a decision that needs careful consideration, advice and legal representation.

Alignment

Working with others is central to this strategy and the farm owners must be aligned in their aims, commitment and farm size and types, says Ian. Alignment is arguably the most essential element to address when setting up a contracting partnership, he stresses. It is important that individuals can strike up and maintain a positive working relationship that will endure the challenges of farming. Any differences – whether they are in opinions or ways of working – could potentially disrupt operations and transactions.

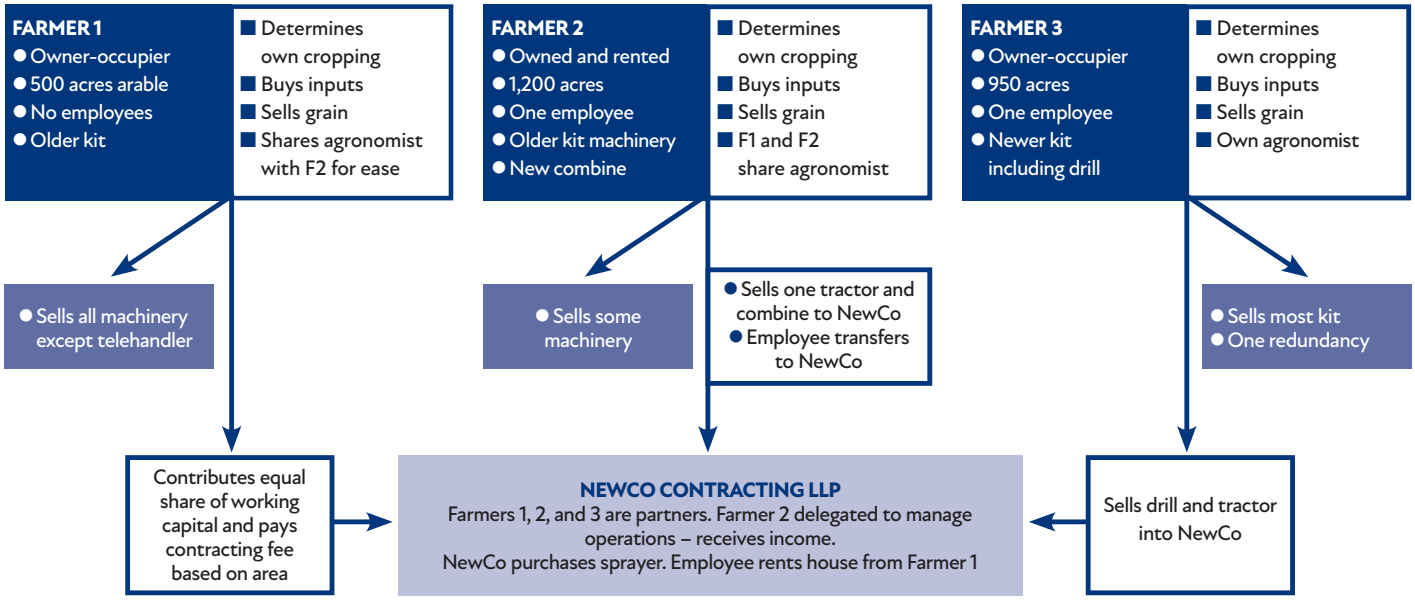
For example, one of the farmers may want to adopt regen or organic methods and this would require a change of kit and philosophy that could put strain on the efficiency of the business.

Growth

It would be possible to take on extra partners as the business becomes established. It is untested but the model could stretch to four, five, six or more parent farms, if they were suitably aligned, says Ian.

Again, the need for legal representation and advice is vital. The difficulty is more people, more divergent views and varying objectives. ■

EXAMPLE CONTRACTING PARTNERSHIP SETUP



Securing the flow: Water resilience in modern farming

As periods of drought and extreme weather become more common, water security is rising up the agenda for UK farmers. Strutt & Parker explores how businesses can improve their water resilience.

Water has traditionally been viewed as a constant for many farmers - a utility that is simply there. However, with the increasing frequency of extreme weather patterns, resulting in prolonged droughts and flash flooding, water security is no longer a given.

"A wide range of experts are warning there could be a critical water shortage in the UK in the next 25 years," says Strutt & Parker's Head of Farming, Natalie Gaibani.

For farmers, there needs to be a fundamental shift in how they view their water resources. "It is no longer just about having a mains-fed trough in a field or assuming you can abstract from a local river indefinitely," says Natalie. "It's about creating systems that reduce the volume of water required and protect your land, crops and livestock from the extremes of the weather."

Diversifying the source

Building resilience starts with diversifying where water comes from, with the aim of reducing cost and reducing the risk of supply interruptions.

"We are helping clients look at the full spectrum of available resources," says Natalie. "This ranges from the installation of large-scale rainwater harvesting systems to capture winter surpluses, to the strategic drilling of boreholes and the restoration of natural springs."

However, sourcing water is only half the battle as managing it is where many businesses lose money. Undetected leaks in aging infrastructure can lead to significant financial waste and potential environmental hazards. A comprehensive audit of mains water management - identifying leaks and optimising distribution - can be a quick way to improve a farm's bottom line.

The soil-water connection

While infrastructure is vital, the most effective water management system on a farm is the soil itself.

"The more organic matter and structure a soil has, the better it acts as a sponge," says Natalie. "Healthy soils infiltrate water more effectively during heavy rainfall, reducing runoff and erosion, while retaining that moisture longer during dry spells. By focusing on regenerative practices, farmers are essentially building a natural reservoir beneath their feet."

Grants and investment advice

Strutt & Parker supports farmers to secure the necessary permissions for new water infrastructure and to identify potential funding streams.

For example, we have secured grants through the Farming Equipment and Technology Fund (FETF) to help farmer invest in rainwater harvesting and more efficient irrigation systems. The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) supports actions to improve soil health, while the Capital Grants scheme includes options to help address water quality issues. There can also be grants from water companies and other localised schemes.

Whether it is securing permissions for new boreholes or leveraging grants for environmental improvements, the goal is to move from a reactive approach to a proactive strategy.

"Water management is a complex puzzle involving hydrology, regulation, and agronomy," says Natalie. "But by viewing water as a finite resource to be managed rather than a utility to be consumed, farmers can future-proof their business."

To find out more
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Scotland EFAs under scrutiny one year into post-Brexit scheme

Scotland is taking a gentler approach than other UK nations to post-Brexit support, but is the Scottish government striking the right balance between productive farming, nature and the environment? **Debbie James** reports

EU-era subsidies in Scotland have been replaced with a four-tier system intended to deliver food security, support rural livelihoods, and tackle the climate and nature crises.

Under the umbrella of The Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, the country's agricultural subsidy system is experiencing the most significant reform since Brexit.

Compared to other UK nations though, notably England, where critics suggest that transition measures such as the abrupt withdrawal of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) are forcing farming off a "cliff edge", the transition package is seen as less radical. Farmers will still receive 70% of funding through direct payments although they must now do more for climate and nature through enhanced greening measures and the new calving interval conditionality for the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme.

A desire to maintain stability is a reason given by the government for not deviating further from the historic Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) system. Others suggest that a pro-independence government is keen to stick closer to a system that could align easily with the current CAP should Scotland one day rejoin the EU as an independent country.

Nim Kibbler, country manager for Scotland at the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN), says that sending farmers off a cliff-edge in terms of support is not in anyone's best interest but she reckons there is a case for going further. We need something that farmers can work at and for some of the direct support to drop away.

"We are not saying farmers should have to climb a mountain but there has to be a policy that suits all farmers, not just those with the greatest lobbying power."

Getting on with it

Nim worries that Scottish policy is perhaps being designed to suit farmers who are the most opposed to change. "Sometimes we think the loudest voices in the room are the majority but there are a lot of middle and third tier farmers who are just getting on with it."

One of the difficulties in Scotland is the broad cross-section of agriculture types, some exceptionally fragile. While transition in Scotland is not as radical as in England, moving away from a system that has offered financial stability for a generation is unquestionably difficult. Yet, as Nim points out: "For some farmers this change will be tough but surely the statement 'but we have always done it this way' is the most costly a farmer could apply to their business?"

Some farmers are in the transition process, others are almost through it after spending years working towards it. "Other people are flirting with the idea but it is scary, there is risk involved, and sometimes doing nothing can feel that there is no risk involved," says Nim.

"What I don't want to see in Scotland is people not changing their farming practices until they either hit full financial crisis or they have some sort of succession change on the farm."

The Scottish government framework falls into four tiers:

- Tier 1 entitles all farmers to a baseline payment if they meet basic environmental and animal welfare standards; at £399m, this is where most of the budget for Scottish agricultural support sits – in 2030 it will reduce to £332m.
- Tier 2 rewards farmers for adopting greener and more ambitious practices, such as reducing tillage, protecting soils, and creating wildlife habitats; the new government has allocated £142m a year to this tier.
- Tier 3 builds on the existing Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) by funding targeted environmental projects under longer-term agreements.
- Tier 4 offers training, advice, and support >

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANGUS FINDLAY; LAURIE CAMPBEL; LALAMY STOCK, ABZEE; ISTOCKPHOTO

< networks to help farmers build knowledge, share best practice, and collaborate through local clusters

All farmers with over 3ha and are actively farming are eligible to join Tier 1. An active farmer test will be introduced in a bid to move away from the 2005 conditionality baselines used historically.

To qualify for payment, all farmers must by now have a Whole Farm Plan in place. This plan must incorporate measures that meet the Scottish government's aims for the way land is farmed. These measures include: integrated pest management (IPM), animal health and welfare, biodiversity audit and a habitat map, soil health and management plan and a carbon audit.

Farmers who have found those requirements the most difficult are crofters whose systems have constraints and practices that differ from the majority. For example, it might cost £600-£1,000 for soil testing but, depending on the size of the croft and in-bye land, a crofter might only qualify for an annual basic payment of £2,000. Losing that £2,000 by not entering the scheme is not an option either because for some crofters that sum can equate to their annual fuel bill.

Enhanced greening

Tier 2 is also a direct payment but with enhanced greening that rewards farmers for going beyond base efficiency to lower emissions or protect nature. Tier 3 is an indirect payment with nature and climate undertakings and payments for measures such as managing habitat for wading birds and conservation grazing.

A number of grants sit within Tier 3, for operational outputs but also capital grants under the Farming Future Investment Scheme; the budget for those grants stood at £32m when the scheme was rolled out in 2025 with 100% payments but that is expected to reduce to £21m and farmers will only receive a proportion of their costs in grant funding.

Under those capital grants, some farmers were given money to pay for water infrastructure after dividing fields into smaller paddocks to apply mob grazing techniques.

There is also a Scottish Small Producers Grant for systems under 3ha – one grant of £33,000 was awarded to an organic producer in Dumfries and Galloway to meet the cost of a mobile butchery unit.

Tier 4, labelled as "complementary", is targeted at delivering training and advice. Probably the most contentious aspect of the scheme overall is ecological focus areas (EFAs), which require farmers to devote 5% of their land to an ecological purpose.

Some farmers won't need to change their practices to comply with the EFA requirements – they are already meeting its objectives – but the government reckons it will introduce nature management on about 2,300 businesses who aren't.

What has been controversial is the recent removal of certain exemptions – previously mixed or livestock farms that had more than 75% temporary grass or forage were exempt from EFA requirements but that exemption has now been withdrawn. Any farm with more than 15ha of arable land which includes grasslands must now have EFA measures on 5% of their land.

They will have to pivot their practices to receive the base payment as financially it is not an option for them to not have an EFA and forego the payment. The sudden withdrawal of the exemption and the pressure on farms that have maximised output to change practices has without doubt been challenging.

According to NFU Scotland, it has affected a number of farming businesses, particularly in areas such as Orkney and on mixed and dairy farms where temporary grassland forms an important part of the farming system.

Challenging

Many of the EFA options were originally designed with arable businesses in mind, meaning there are fewer practical choices available for farmers whose businesses are based largely around temporary grassland, says Jonnie Hall, NFU Scotland's deputy CEO and director of policy.

This has been especially challenging for some businesses already managing land under agri-environment schemes, where the options available can become increasingly limited. NFU Scotland has consistently argued that environmental requirements should be designed in a way that supports profitable farming businesses.

Farmers and crofters are already delivering significant benefits for biodiversity, climate and soil health through their day-to-day farming activities, Jonnie maintains, and future support schemes should recognise and build on that existing good practice.

"While we recognise that environmental

TRANSITION FARMER ALAN STEVEN

Combinable crops and vegetable grower Alan Steven sees his EFA as an incentive to improve soil health and structure. At Hillhead Farm near St Andrews, Fife, he sows cover crops on EFA land as winter grazing for a neighbouring sheep farmer.

Changes to the rules which now permit more grasses to be grown in the cover crop mix will allow for a more flexible grazing window, says Alan.

"There are certain fields where we can build fertility and with the sheep grazing the land their dung is providing us with organic matter. "We don't get a big income from the grazing but as long as we are getting something back that covers the cost of the seed and a bit more on top, it works for us because of the good it brings to the soil."


Alan Steven

The longer grazing period now permitted is beneficial too, Alan adds.

"We don't want to graze too quickly because the crop and root structure need to develop, the longer window for that gives us more flexibility, it suits our system. "We used to be more restricted on when we could graze and sometimes it wasn't the best option, for example if the weather had turned wet and to get the grazing out of it we might have ended up destroying some of the benefits to soil structure the cover crop had provided."

● See p39 for more on our Transition Farmers

ENVIRONMENTAL FOCUS AREA CHANGES

In 2027, the EFA requirement will increase to 7%, an incremental shift upwards which many in the industry predict could eventually rise to a ceiling of 10%. To get on the front foot in preparation for that uplift, some farmers have already ringfenced 7%.

Lewis Butlin, rural consultancy technical manager at Agrovista, says notice of the 2% augmentation of EFAs had helped farmers with upfront planning, including those previously protected by the temporary grassland exemption. The two new options of herb- and legume-rich pasture and low input grassland have helped – if half a field accounted for 5% of their land they have instead sown the entire field with one of these leys, ready for next year's changes.

"Some arable farms have rejigged things slightly – where they have established buffer strips they have made sure there is enough there to make them up to 7% next year because if they are getting specialist seed mixes or equipment in they have decided to get the job done without having to revisit it again," says Lewis. The new options have mostly helped farmers achieve their EFA target. "I haven't come across anyone who has struggled this year," says Lewis.

"For the farmers who suddenly found themselves in the caveat of needing an EFA, where they have got livestock as well as arable they have looked at the catch crop option. For example, where they are growing spring barley they will sow an over-winter cover crop that they can graze off with the livestock and will then establish an arable crop or grassland next year."

Obvious choice

For dairy farms that have temporary grass in their rotation alongside brassicas and some crops, farms that had been affected by the removal of the EFA exemption, the legume- and herb-rich pasture is an obvious choice as it has allowed them to maintain a similar cropping. It remains to be seen what further options are introduced in subsequent years.

Two years ago, the Scottish government released 35 proposed options, many of which looked very similar to those that sit in England's Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), perhaps an indication of the further EFA possibilities that will become available in the coming years. This potential blueprint of things to come is likely to have been delayed because of uncertainty that historically existed over funding for agriculture from Westminster.

Last year marked a shift away from the system of the setting of an annual budget by the UK government to a three-year allocation. It means there are two more years of guaranteed cash from Westminster, taking Scotland through to 2028. Lewis believes that in 2028 more changes will be introduced, to Whole Farm Plans for example. "There are five options available for these and there is talk of a sixth one coming in on nutrient management planning in 2028, in that year all soils will need to be sampled too, I think 2028 will be the pivotal change."

measures will continue to form an important part of future agricultural support, they must be practical, flexible and work alongside food production rather than unnecessarily restricting it.

"Our view has always been that support should reward agricultural activities that deliver environmental outcomes, rather than requiring measures that remove productive land from use where there is little practical benefit."

Farmers affected by the change have adapted in several ways, by altering rotations, identifying alternative EFA options and reviewing how different areas of land are managed to meet the requirements. However, there could be additional costs, complexity and administrative burden associated with these changes, particularly for businesses that have limited options available to them.

Diverse systems

As the Scottish government develops future EFA proposals, including those relating to permanent grassland, Jonnie insists it will be important that the practical experience of farmers affected by these changes should help inform policy development. "Scotland's farming systems are incredibly diverse, and future schemes must reflect that reality," he says.

"We want to see future EFA measures recognise existing good practice, protect the productive capacity of farmland, provide maximum flexibility for businesses and minimise unnecessary bureaucracy. Ultimately, any future requirements must be fair, workable and support profitable farming businesses, because profitable farms are the foundation for delivering food production, environmental outcomes and thriving rural communities."

Nim believes that transitioning to more nature-friendly farming practices will in time be beneficial to the output on those farms.

"By taking out inorganic fertilisers, pesticides and other inputs, production might fall off for a couple of years but once soil health and the biodiversity around it has recovered the eco-system services will start to kick back in and supply these for free. Farmers just need to trust in the process." ■

A journey from veterinary science to dairy farming

Devon dairy farmer Holly Atkinson believes that different routes into farming should be encouraged and that varied talent and fresh perspectives are critical to building a resilient future for the industry.

Although she was raised in a rural area, Holly's first real experience of farming came when she began working on farms from the age of 15 to gain experience before applying to vet school. This early exposure to a wide range of farming work made her fall in love with the industry. "I realised I could be a part of this world without owning a farm and without it being in my blood," she says.

A different route

Holly went on to study veterinary science and worked as a vet for eight and a half years. After having her first child, she began helping out on a local farm, managing youngstock on a 600-cow spring block calving dairy unit. What she expected to be temporary became a six-year role.

"The farm had a significant pneumonia problem in calves, which I turned round. It was really satisfying, as I could use my veterinary skills, see the whole process through and then see the positive impact."

Earlier this year, Holly and her husband took the plunge and applied for a Devon County Council farm tenancy.

Seeing beyond the farm gate

For Holly, a key concern whether she had the right tools and network to be successful given her less conventional route into the industry To help overcome this, Holly applied for the Tesco Future Farmer Programme after seeing a post about it on Facebook.

The programme, which has just been extended for another three years in partnership with Harper Adams University's School of Sustainable Food and Farming, aims to support the next generation of British farmers by providing practical experience, expert insight and a valuable network of peers across the industry.

"One of the biggest benefits was gaining visibility of the full food supply chain. It was eye-opening to see how every step in the process works, from farmers out in the field through to marketing and then through to shop floor," she says.

As a dairy farmer, Holly says it's easy to focus on what happens up to the point milk leaves the farm, but the programme helped her think much more broadly about what happens next.

Building resilience

For Holly, the programme gave her confidence at a critical moment. Its focus on sustainability, professionalism and forward thinking has also reinforced the direction she and her husband want to take their business to become as resilient as possible.

They are now applying her learnings through improved soil health, herbal leys, better grazing, water infrastructure and greater use of trees and hedges to help the farm cope with hotter, drier summers and future proof their farm.

"Everyone can have a good year and do well, but I think it's finding ways to make your business resilient so you can thrive in the tough seasons as well," she says.

Fresh perspectives

Holly believes her own route into farming shows why the industry should continue to look beyond traditional entry points, even as she recognises the enormous value of knowledge passed down through farming families.

"Getting new people in, they can bring a fresh perspective," she says. "For me, I have more of a consumer perspective, so I query things, rather than just saying, 'this is how it's always been done'."

For Holly, part of the answer is showing young people from an early age that farming is a viable, rewarding and exciting career, and not just something to fall back on.

Holly's journey shows the importance of bringing a wide range of perspectives and expertise into the industry to help it thrive in the future.

Apply now for the 2026/27 Future Farmer Programme

www.schoolofsustainablefoodandfarming.org/training/future-farmer-programme.cfm

TESCO

Fodder beet test and reMooable Energy launch

Transition Farmers from Ayrshire and South Yorkshire open their farm gates for an update on progress. **Debbie James** reports

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

Andrew McFadzean

The resilience of fodder beet as a grazing crop has been tested in tough conditions on Andrew McFadzean's Dalchomie Farm. But with high utilisation and beef cattle achieving an average daily liveweight gain (DLWG) of 0.8-0.9kg, the crop has proved itself.

Andrew had allocated half the 12ha he grows annually to a grazing variety, the remainder to lift and include in the growing and finishing rations – historically 3ha had been grazed.

Sixty Shorthorn-cross, Charolais-cross, Limousin-cross and Aberdeen Angus-cross cattle from suckler herds, purchased as stores from livestock markets, were transitioned onto the crop at 360-370kg in early October 2025. What followed was a winter of exceptional rainfall, but as Andrew reports: "The cattle did tremendously well on the fodder beet, growing 0.8-0.9kg a day with no supplementary feeding."

Good utilisation was down to allocating only two or three rows daily, he reckons. "Utilisation was fine but the mess was horrendous, I was miserable having to move that fence every day. The cattle did well though and that is what matters."

So much so that Andrew has increased his grazing acreage further, planting 4ha with Robbos in the first week of May. "Robbos has a high dry matter so it can stay in the ground for a bit longer with less risk of frost damage," he explains. The crop was planted in the same fields for a second year.

"That practice is commonplace up here and farmers in New Zealand have been doing it for many years with great success," says Andrew. An improvement in the weather as the season transitioned into spring saw first cut silage taken on 1 May – the earliest harvest ever achieved at Dalchomie Farm.

"In my father's day, it would have been the end of May or the beginning of June, and for the past four or five years we've cut on the 12-14 May, but this year it was 1 May with very high quality grass, it was lovely stuff," says Andrew.

TRANSITION GOALS
- Increase cattle numbers and slash finishing time
- Reduce dependence on inputs
- Improve grassland and access

Eddie Andrew

A Sheffield dairy farm has found a novel way of securing an electricity supply at a stable price, by giving local people the chance to invest in new on-farm renewable energy infrastructure in return for interest earned on shares valued from just £5 each.

In July 2026, a share offer was launched by Sheffield Energy Works, a joint project by the Andrew family, South Yorkshire Ecofit CIC and Sheffield Renewables, allowing the local community the opportunity to help meet the £600,000 cost of a 3kW rooftop solar array and a 22kW bioelectric plant at Cliffe House Farm.

The farm will buy most of the electric that is generated, which is predicted to earn shareholders an average of 4% interest on the value of their shares over the next 25 years, after which ownership of the hardware will pass to the farm business.

After investing heavily in a new dairy shed and milking robots, the family would not have been in a financial position to install renewable energy in the medium term, says Eddie Andrew.

The solution, which Eddie has named "reMooable Energy 2026", is a "win win" for everyone involved, he believes. "The farm is always going to be here, buying electricity, so we are a guaranteed customer from the moment the solar panels are switched on," says Eddie, who processes milk from the herd into ice cream and pasteurises liquid milk for direct sales.

"Our customers can buy ice cream from us, we can buy electricity from them, and they will earn interest to buy more ice cream.

"It keeps the money circulating locally, none of it leaves the city to line the pockets of big corporate energy companies."

Valuing shares at a base price of £5 creates an opportunity for many people to get involved. Anyone who can afford a pint of beer can be part of the energy company, Eddie reckons.

"We didn't want to make the shares unaffordable, we really wanted our customers to buy shares if they wanted to." It is likely significant parts of the infrastructure will begin to be installed by the end of 2026.

TRANSITION GOALS
- Co-operating to reduce costs
- Establishing new dairy
- Reducing carbon footprint

FARM FACTS
Cliffe House Farm, Sheffield, South Yorkshire
- Farm size: 73ha
- Annual rainfall: 850mm
- Soil type: Mixed clay loam

See p39 for more on our Transition Farmers

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEFF HOLMES, NATHAN STIRK

Henry Reynolds explains how the farm switched to regen

From field to drink carton: Linking the supply chain

Farmers Weekly's Transition Project visited Northamptonshire to see how one farming family has switched to regen production and strengthened its links across the supply chain. **Jonathan Riley** reports

Scale, co-operation, efficiency and resilience across the supply chain can yield dividends for everyone involved, a Transition Project supply chain visit has heard.

The whole supply chain was represented on the visit from Reynolds Farmers to grain marketing company Frontier Agriculture, Camgrain farmers' co-operative, Navara Oat Milling and finally plant-based drinks manufacturer Alpro.

Reynolds Farmers

The day began at Reynolds Farmers, Manor Farm near Kettering – a 200ha mixed arable and livestock estate owned and managed by Henry and Ana Reynolds. Underpinning its role as a robust link in the chain is Manor Farm's business resilience through its approach to regen farming with a strong focus on soil structure on the heavy clay land.

Henry explained, the farm has a low soil disturbance approach after switching to a regen system in the early 2000s. Straw is chopped so adds directly to soil organic matter and supports worm activity. Worm populations have improved soil structure and texture with better aeration and drainage characteristics, Henry said. Worms also promote soil microbe growth, adding to the availability of nutrients for crop growth.

Further benefits to soil organic matter have been achieved by introducing sheep to the arable fields. Previously the farm's flock was run on dedicated pasture but allowing sheep access to arable fields to graze cover crops has helped boost soil organic matter and added nutrients without applying artificial nitrogen.

Tillage, fertiliser and chemical control strategies are based on assessment and carefully tailored to needs.

Henry's father Stephen – a regen farming pioneer and active partner in the business – is a proponent of assessing soil structure by digging pits. "Visually evaluating the structure allows the business to tailor its annual tillage programme for each field, optimising inputs and controlling costs," said Stephen.

Overall, the regen strategy has reduced fuel use by 27 litres/ha and slashed artificial fertiliser

Navara produces wholegrain, coarse-cut, rolled and milled oats for food, drink and cosmetics

PHOTOGRAPHY: OLI LEES

Oats are transferred directly from Camgrain to Navara via auger

costs and insecticide use. Knock-on benefits include less wear on machinery and equipment and a huge reduction in the farm's carbon output. Resilience to extreme weather has also been improved.

The soil structure is now better able to retain moisture during dry weather and is freer draining, making it less prone to waterlogging and erosion in heavy rain.

Frontier Agriculture

Representing the next link in the chain, Frontier's Tom Coulter said the Reynolds' approach is important because the whole supply chain is increasingly looking to demonstrate its green credentials and its resilience to environmental, geopolitical and social risk.

"Food processing and retail firms are under increasing pressure to demonstrate resilience to climate risks," said Tom. "Farms that can show how they have set up their businesses to cope with change are more likely to attract and retain contracts," he said.

Frontier supplies inputs to growers and markets 5m tonnes of grain each year. It acts as the primary grain marketing and distribution partner, to farmer-owned co-operative, Camgrain, the next link in the chain and a focus of the visit.

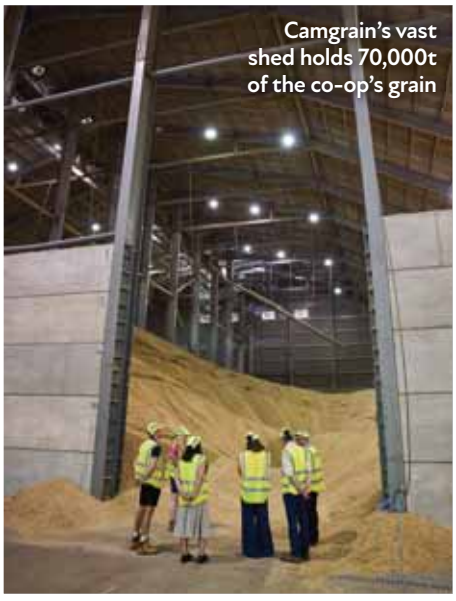
Camgrain

Camgrain chief executive Simon Willis demonstrated how the huge scale of the operation near Kettering benefited the co-operative's grower members. Across all of its sites, Camgrain can store 500,000t of grain allowing flexibility at peak harvest times, Simon pointed out.

The huge grain shed at the Kettering site can hold 70,000t of grain which is closely managed from arrival by a computer-controlled system. Grain is quality tested at unloading and then transferred by a conveyor at the top of the shed and dropped into partitioned zones.

Crops are monitored for moisture and heat then dried, cooled or treated to ensure the grain is held at peak condition. Outflows are via augers running underneath the shed and controllers can select grain quantities from any particular zone according to customer spec.

It is even possible to combine zones to mix loads to reach the target requirements for characteristics like protein and moisture content. Having access to these state-of-the-art drying, storage and processing facilities has major benefits for the co-operatives' growers, who would otherwise face significant on-farm investment costs.



Camgrain's vast shed holds 70,000t of the co-op's grain

Navara Oat Milling

From Camgrain, oats are transferred via auger to the Navara Oat Milling company, a joint venture with Frontier.

Managing director Donna Smith explained that Navara's plant is the largest oat milling and processing factory in Europe. All of the oats are sourced from farms within a 75-mile radius to minimise food miles and carbon footprints, Donna said. "Having the high degree of transparency and being able to show everything from the farm to the oat flour we produce, provides assurances and key information to our customers," she added.

Alpro

One of Navara's customers, and the final link in the chain, is plant-based drinks producer Alpro.

Danone's Katie Smith explained that the company had recently committed to sourcing all of its oats for the British market exclusively from UK growers. To make the switch to 100% British Oats, the Navara Oat Mill has been crucial.

"Their experience and close ties with local farmers means we've been able to commit to source our oats from farmers mostly within an 80-mile radius of the Alpro's site in nearby Burton Latimer," said Katie. By switching from sourcing oats in mainland Europe to local suppliers, we've substantially cut land miles – and with them, carbon emissions, she added.

Alpro switch to British oats

- 25% lower carbon footprint
- 20% reduction in land use
- 70% reduction in water use across the product lifecycle
- 6,000t reduction in Alpro's annual carbon footprint. ■

Tree planting frustration and OSR policy reset

Transition is following a group of farmers on their journey to adapt and meet the challenges of farming. **Debbie James** reports on the progress of two farms

FARM FACTS

Aberbranddu Farm, Llanwrda, Carmarthenshire

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

Irwel Jones

More than half of the acreage Irwel Jones farms is classified as habitat and includes 65ha of mature woodland. But the upland sheep and beef farmer will be required to plant 250 trees as a proviso for entering Wales' new post-Brexit subsidy scheme. Irwel applied to join the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) ahead of the 15 May 2026 deadline. As the process of phasing out the Basic Payment Scheme begins in Wales, the SFS offers the business financial security, which Irwel says has been helped by the Welsh government confirming payments for the entry tier of the SFS, the 'universal' layer.

"We have a figure now for what we will receive and it seems very reasonable compared to the payments first proposed so it is one less financial worry for us, although there is still little clarity on the optional tier and the payments for that."

But aspects of the scheme are too prescriptive, Irwel suggests. "When I totalled up how much habitat land we had to include on the SFS application, 51% of the farm was classified as habitat, including 160 acres of oak woodland, but we must still find somewhere to plant another 250 trees because it is a condition of entry.

Entering the SFS won't affect his farming system as he has already reduced fertiliser and fuel inputs and scaled back sheep numbers to match that, from a peak of 1,500 breeding ewes to lambing 1,300 in 2026.

"It was a policy that we were already well on the road to but we were pushed in that direction by fertiliser and fuel prices not the SFS," says Irwel.

After a period of increasing stock numbers in an attempt to maximise income and benefit from economies of scale, the focus of the family business has now shifted to a lower input system - feeding no concentrates to ewes for example - with the goal of creating long term resilience.

The smaller flock reduced pressure at lambing and this paid dividends for ewe and lamb health.

TRANSITION GOALS

- Carefully extend and manage natural woodland
- Plant hedgerows to improve biodiversity and aid pasture management
- Rely less on volatile inputs

TRANSITION GOALS

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

Andy Bason

A "hard reset" of oilseed rape (OSR) agronomy at Newhouse Farm is yielding good results. After the crop suffered big losses in 2025, a rethink was needed, admits farm manager Andy Bason. Among the changes introduced were a switch from planting home-saved seed to purchasing seed and bringing drilling forward to early August.

Conventional varieties were historically grown but hybrids have now been introduced. "We also baled the straw straight after harvest to try to alleviate some of the slug pressure," says Andy.

"The hard reset seems to have worked but that said OSR crops are doing well everywhere. But we had to do things differently and I am sure everything has played a part," says Andy. What is also not clear-cut at this stage is how land has responded to lower nitrogen (N) application rates, a trial supported by Southern Water.

FARM FACTS

Newhouse Farm, Northington Down, Alresford, Hampshire

- Farm size: 800ha main farm
- Annual rainfall: 770mm

"The plot where we applied no N surprised me in that it only yielded 3t/ha less than the field average of 7.8 t/ha but we can't read too much into it yet because of residual N in the soil and other factors, it is a bit of an eye opener though," says Andy.

"We hope to reduce fertiliser use overall and that is a particular priority in this current climate with prices at such a high level."

Reducing inputs is not just about improving business resilience but is being done with one eye on future generations - reflected also in Newhouse Farm's policy of hosting school visits. Schools have been welcomed onto the farm for the past five years but demand has increased year on year to an average of one a month. Andy regards these visits as "massively important".

"We have got some really good connections with local schools, some are coming back for their second and third year, one that visited last week immediately booked up again for next year.

"Schools want to fit a visit around their curriculum and these are quite varied, we can cater for most elements whether that's geography or a little bit of history, we can make it work depending on what they are learning," concludes Andy.

See p39 for more on our Transition Farmers

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD SWINGLER, RICHARD STANTON

What is Landscape Recovery– and how can it help my farm?

Since the first round opened in 2022, over 1,000 ambitious farmers and land managers have participated in the development of the Landscape Recovery scheme – one of three of England's Environmental Land Management schemes.

What exactly is Landscape Recovery, and how can it benefit farm businesses? Landscape Recovery (LR) is based on the principle that nature and farm resilience are intrinsically linked. The work delivers benefits for farms, for the environment, and for communities alike.

There are 4 main features of the scheme:
1. Large-scale projects
2. Long-term public funding (for example, for 20 years or longer)
3. Bespoke agreements
4. Blended funding (projects need to explore options for both public and private funding)

To date, there have been two pilot rounds of Landscape Recovery, with 56 projects involved in the development phases. Three projects are now in the delivery phase.

LR in action: restoring habitats and reducing flood risk in the Upper Duddon Valley

One of the first projects to start delivery, the Upper Duddon Landscape Recovery Project, began in July 2025, across c,2,800 hectares of uplands in South-West Cumbria. Led by the University of Leeds, this project brings together tenant farmers, landowners and environmental organisations in an ambitious, 20-year project.

The project is helping to preserve the longstanding tradition of fell farming in the valley area, at the same time as supporting species and restoring a mosaic of habitats. It will restore and re-naturalise parts of the River Duddon and its tributaries to improve water quality and river health, helping to slow the flow and contribute to natural flood management. The project will also create jobs and provide opportunities for the local community to contribute to nature recovery through a vibrant volunteering and education programme.

What can LR principles do for me?

- Restoring native habitats means attracting more pollinators, boosting natural pest control and improving soil health – all things that support good crop yields
- Re-meandering rivers and restoring natural wetlands can help keep valuable nutrients in your soil, and reduce the risk of your land flooding during high rainfall
- Native animals and insects provide free, natural services that improve agricultural productivity, whether through grazing the fields or burrowing the soil
- Entering a LR project means working with people who understand the local area and who tailor a project specifically to the nature and businesses that reside there.

Mark Hodgson of Blackhall Farm, who is involved in the project, spoke of his experience getting the project off the ground:

"The development stage was really useful. Having other farmers there who could help introduce you to all these organisations made everything a lot easier. As a farmer, you're often stuck in the hills and don't really get chance to speak to these people. It's opened a lot of doors for me. You can grow your network with people who encourage you, who can help to make your vision happen."

Find out more about the scheme and its ongoing projects by searching "Landscape Recovery" on the Defra Farming Blog.

To find out more
Visit www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england

NATURAL ENGLAND

Where to find project articles

The Transition initiative offers a vast bank of practical articles, which can be downloaded for free

Business resilience

- How to make rotations more resilient – Summer 2021 (p15)
- Advice on building climate resilience into business plans – Winter 2023-24 (p7)
- How to stress-test your farm business – Summer 2022 (p10)
- Why better planning can reduce machinery costs – Winter 2023-24 (p30)
- How to protect your business from a crisis – Summer 2024 (p23)
- How to boost financial resilience – Winter 2024-25 (p7)
- Five ways to build resilience on arable farms – Winter 2024-25 (p24)
- Raby Estate embraces change to secure future – Summer 2025 (p17)
- How family charters could strengthen farm businesses – Autumn 2025 (p23)
- How to transition from price taker to price-maker – Winter 2025-26

Supply chain

- How supply chain is helping farmers work with nature – Summer 2022 (p15)
- How TCFD will hit farming – Spring 2024 (p36)
- Supply chain funding – what's on offer for regen farming – Spring 2025 (p18)
- How looking beyond the farm gate can secure a better future – Summer 2025 (p7)
- How market insight can guide Transition strategy – Spring 2026 (p16)

Carbon management

- Measuring and managing carbon: What to consider – Autumn 2021 (p11)
- The carbon trading conundrum: Risk or revenue generator? – Autumn 2022 (p23)
- Trading carbon and natural capital – a lawyer's eye view – Autumn 2022 (p29)
- How to get a carbon-based income from woodland – Autumn 2022 (p31)
- Is there money to be made from carbon farming? – Autumn 2022 (p41)

Collaboration

- How collaboration cuts costs and increases efficiency – Winter 2021-22 (p47)
- Local farmers unite to clean up polluted river – Winter 2022-23 (p45)
- How collaboration delivers landscape-scale change – Summer 2023 (p19)

Data and tools

- How data helped transform beef herd efficiency – Autumn 2022 (p10)
- How to take a data-led approach to sub-field costs – Spring 2025 (p7)
- AHDB baselining project hailed as game changer – Summer 2025 (p12)
- How to get the most out of farm data – Winter 2025-26 (p17)

Diversification

- The benefits of Paulownia trees for net-zero targets – Spring 2022 (p47)
- Expert advice for making trees work on your farm – Autumn 2023 (p32)
- How trees can enhance and support your business – Summer 2025 (p28)

Emissions management

- How livestock farmers can cut greenhouse gas emissions – Autumn 2021 (p19)
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