

# A Common Countryside Policy

Securing a prosperous green future after Brexit

A CONFOR DISCUSSION PAPER



**Confor**  
Promoting forestry and wood

## Seizing the ‘new possibilities’

In 2019, the United Kingdom will leave the European Union. This paper begins to imagine a rural future beyond Brexit – and beyond the Common Agricultural Policy.

In his first major speech as UK Environment Secretary, *The Unfrozen Moment*, Michael Gove said that “we need beauty in our lives as much as we need food and shelter”. That might sum up the three great goods of our countryside: a healthy environment, food to eat, and timber to build our homes and manufacture the many day-to-day products we use. Our lives depend absolutely on all three.

Yet forestry and the environment have been marginalised by the dominant role in rural policy and funding that the Common Agricultural Policy gives to farming.

After Brexit, forestry seeks fair, equal treatment. This should be a cornerstone of a new *Common Countryside Policy* – fair treatment for all land uses, and a recognition that the countryside is about more than farming.

Some form of public support will be required to secure a thriving and environmentally robust countryside in the future, but it must be targeted to deliver a greater range of public benefits – economic, environmental and social.

Based on what the UK Government has said, a 2019 Brexit looks likely to be followed by three years of continued CAP-style funding. Well before this, there needs to be agreement on new mechanisms and outcomes so they are in place from 2022.

CAP hasn’t worked well enough for the UK – so let’s embrace what Michael Gove has called “the new possibilities” after Brexit. Let’s create a more vibrant, prosperous and sustainable rural sector – through a new, integrated approach: a Common Countryside Policy.

**Stuart Goodall**  
Chief Executive, Confor.



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# If the cap doesn't fit...

Leaving the EU, it is likely that UK rural funding will change fundamentally. This is the 'unfrozen moment' described by Michael Gove (*pictured below*), who regards CAP as a system which 'puts resources in the hands of the already wealthy rather than into the common good of our shared natural environment'.<sup>1</sup> We must take the opportunity to replace CAP – the Common Agricultural Policy – with CCP, a Common Countryside Policy.

CAP has been a straightjacket on policy and practice. During the unfolding debate on what comes next, it has been criticised by a wide range of interest groups. Greener UK, a group of 13 environmental organisations with a combined membership of 7.9 million, said: "We need to replace the outdated Common Agricultural Policy with new and ambitious policies."<sup>2</sup>

A major report from the Policy Exchange think-tank was scathing: "Under the CAP, agriculture has seen decreasing employment, among the lowest productivity out of all the industrial sectors in England, and a failure to facilitate competitiveness and diversity in the wider rural economy."<sup>3</sup>

CAP is based in legislation and designed for a very different era and a very different set of challenges: ensuring food security in the face of rationing and real hunger. Since then, the rural economy has diversified dramatically, and pressure to improve the environment has become more urgent – yet CAP continues primarily to fund farm production, which is just one part of a diverse rural economy.

CAP has built barriers between farming and other land uses like tourism and forestry and created a culture of thinking about the countryside biased in favour of agriculture. For example, CAP created an artificial system where farmers were penalised if they planted trees. This contributed to a sharp

decline in planting, especially in England, where woodland creation dropped to its lowest level in modern times in 2016.

CAP rewarded specific activity rather than broader positive outcomes. Interminable cycles of CAP consumed the time and energies of generations of politicians, civil servants and landowners in a 'stop-start' funding system. It locked farmers into subsidy dependence, rather than investing in making them profitable, productive and sustainable land managers. This investment approach is one the forestry sector has demonstrated for many years. Grants are given for woodland creation to international sustainability standards, but there is no ongoing subsidy for producing wood.

CAP meant land-uses such as forestry depended on the purchase of a whole farm, reinforcing the impression that farms and forests were competing and incompatible. The Woodland Trust has already called for an integrated land use policy to remove the artificial barriers against tree planting.<sup>4</sup>

Replacing the Common Agricultural Policy with a 'British Agricultural Policy' – the phrase used in various policy papers – would be a massive missed opportunity.<sup>5</sup> CAP has failed our rural areas and we must move towards a wider focus on all rural sectors to maximise the benefits of continuing public funding. We should enable those who work the land to choose the best mix of activities. Michael Gove has already said future support will depend on delivering for the environment as well as the economy.

CAP is outdated. It creates barriers, inequality and competition – and that can't be right. A Common Countryside Policy must stop thinking in terms of 'diversified farming', and embrace truly diverse land use.



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## A COMMON COUNTRYSIDE POLICY MUST BE:

### FAIR

With all land uses treated equally, so far as they contribute to sustainable rural development.

### SUSTAINABLE

A Common Countryside Policy must deliver a combination of economic, environmental and social benefits, which enrich and enhance the countryside.

### FOCUSED

Future rural funding will be tight, and must be directed towards investment which creates profitable and productive land uses which simultaneously increase environmental and social benefits.

### INTEGRATED

Any future rural policy must allow landowners to integrate different land uses and remove the bias to agriculture which has developed over many years. For example, this might mean the integration of woodland on farms, the integration of local food production with local food tourism, or payment for ecosystem services as part of the process of production.



## What would a common countryside policy look like?

A post-Brexit system should give farmers and landowners the opportunity to make decisions based on what is best and most sustainable for their land, based on long-term and wide-ranging benefit, not on the need to chase subsidy.

The NFU has said that, amidst all the uncertainties of Brexit, dealing with income volatility in the agricultural sector will be one of the top priorities for farmers.<sup>6</sup> A Common Countryside Policy would allow them to consider whether other land uses can be part of the answer to that challenge – choosing from a new menu of sustainable options.

Some of the starting-points to move towards a common countryside policy might be:

- Accepting that rural policy after Brexit must be more than an agriculture policy.
- Committing to an integrated rural strategy for sustainable development that increases the economic, environmental and social prosperity of our countryside;
- Focussing policy support, beyond agriculture, to tackle challenges like local employment, reducing carbon emissions and key national requirements such as construction, health, and education.
- Developing mechanisms with transitional funding that target investment in diverse land management which reduces long-term subsidy dependence;
- Setting out a clear timescale for introducing the new measures, to enable farmers and landowners to plan, beginning in 2022 at the latest;
- Ensuring that all rural sectors meet the same minimum level of environmental regulation.



Many rural sector bodies are now recognising the future need not be about stark choices between different land uses, or based on outdated funding structures. Environmental charity WWF UK said: “A future agricultural policy should also incentivise tree planting. This would also help secure the future of the UK livestock industry.”<sup>7</sup>

CLA Wales, which represents rural landowners and businesses, has said: “For too long we have seen forestry and agriculture as competing land uses. Now may be the opportunity to look at land use as a whole and look at the opportunities to bring forestry and farming closer together.”<sup>8</sup>

Quality Meat Scotland highlighted the simultaneous economic and environmental opportunity: “Agro-forestry could be used to allow integration of grazing and forestry to the benefit of carbon capture while sustaining livestock production”<sup>9</sup>

The Soil Association said: “Agroforestry has the potential to be a win-win for land managers and the climate. We believe there is significant potential to increase the practice.”<sup>10</sup>

Collaboration between all parties interested in a sustainable rural future is vital as we move towards a Common Countryside Policy after Brexit.

On behalf of the forestry and timber industry, Confor works closely with all interest groups to map out a sustainable rural future. This conversation is a work in progress – but it is clear that forestry has an enhanced part to play in a common countryside policy.

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# So why forestry?

Modern, mixed forestry can help to deliver a sustainable rural future. Unlike most industries, greater economic activity in the forestry sector can deliver greater social and environmental benefits simultaneously.

Faced with environmental challenges, the forestry and timber industry has confronted the need to become truly sustainable over the last quarter of a century. In the process, it has grown into a £2 billion UK industry which employs almost 80,000 people, generating a wide range of environmental and social benefits in the process.

Most of these 80,000 jobs offer good salaries and career opportunities in rural areas with limited sources of employment. Forestry has become a mainstay of the rural economy – and much more can be achieved. A Confor paper explained that, in England alone, the industry could stimulate up to 7000 new jobs – a figure supported by Defra economists.<sup>11</sup>

And as the infographic shows, new forestry will contribute significantly to tackling climate

change. Modern approaches to the planning, design and location of forests creates real opportunities to reduce future flood risk, to provide new habitats for wildlife and to contribute to wider habitat networks that support biodiversity across whole landscapes.

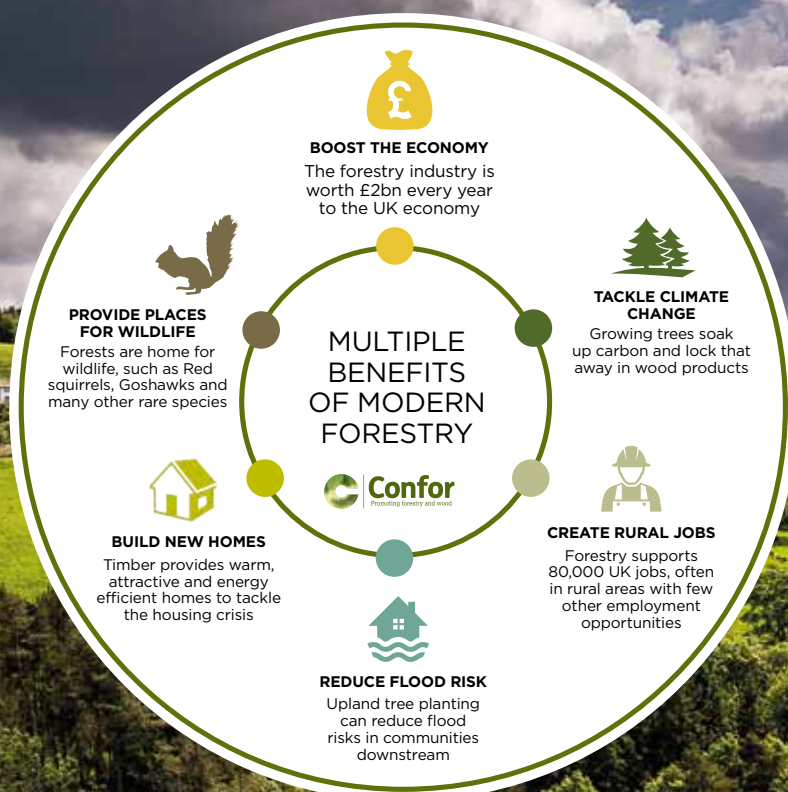
Trees provide the timber to build homes and to create many other products we use in our daily lives, including modern replacements for polluting materials like plastic. Modern, mixed forestry offers wide-ranging recreational opportunities with proven benefits to our health and wellbeing.

Yet the true potential of the forestry sector has not been realised, due to a lack of policy support for modern, mixed forestry and the straightjacket of CAP. Both have contributed to a sharp drop-off in tree planting over the last 25 years, with 2016 seeing the lowest number of trees planted in modern times.<sup>12</sup>

Only 13 per cent of the United Kingdom – and just 10 per cent of England – is covered by trees, against an average in the rest of Europe of almost 40 per cent. As a result, the UK is the third



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biggest net importer of timber in the world, after China and Japan. We import timber products to the tune of £7 billion a year, one-twelfth of our total balance of payments deficit.<sup>13</sup>

Enhanced tree planting can deliver significant benefits for our economy, environment and communities, minimise our impact on precious global forests, and help in the transition to a common countryside policy.

There is significant evidence that increased tree planting can help farmers and landowners re-shape their businesses for a post-Brexit future. A 2017 report by think-tank The Policy Exchange, *Farming Tomorrow*, proposes an “integrated land management policy framework, which facilitates the deeper integration of forestry and agriculture” in which payments for ecosystem services should be ‘available both to farms and other landowners’.<sup>14</sup> However, while the report mentioned the multiple social and environmental benefits of forestry, it failed to state clearly its most immediate benefit to the majority of UK farms, faced with unprofitability if subsidies are reduced: forestry can be highly profitable, with the potential to keep farmers on the land without direct payments.

Forestry provides an opportunity for smaller farmers to become financially sustainable on land which would otherwise be neither productive nor competitive. It also offers the possibility for innovative and diversified forms of land ownership, such as community ownership. Integrating forestry and reducing competition with direct farm subsidies opens up considerable possibilities for new, innovative entrants to the rural economy.

Recent work by Confor, including *Farm Forestry* (2017), explains the benefits forestry can deliver for farmers – including the provision of shelter-belts in exposed areas to help improve livestock performance and growing trees to make better use of more marginal farmland. Tree planting in upland areas can also reduce the risk of downstream flood risks.

In the longer-term, forestry offers income diversification – providing woodfuel from thinning trees as they grow, delivering a secure long-term income from timber, and increasing a farm’s value before handing it on to future generations. This is significant at a time when public funding will come under severe pressure.

Independent studies commissioned by Confor in Eskdalemuir (southern Scotland) and Wales showed forestry can deliver far greater economic benefits than farming in certain areas. Removing public funding, forestry in Eskdalemuir produced three times the economic output and the same number of jobs as farming, created double the spend in the local economy and traded at a surplus of £149 per hectare, compared to a loss of £22 for farming in the same area before subsidy.<sup>15</sup>



## An opportunity we must not miss

Change brings uncertainty, but also opportunity. Brexit provides a vital opportunity to rethink rural policy to be inclusive and based on the principles of sustainability, creating more social and environmental benefits as the countryside grows economically.

A Common Countryside Policy would offer the opportunity to throw off the straightjacket of CAP and build a sustainable rural future.

Forestry has a big part to play in that sustainable future, as many different organisations have realised. The Soil Association has listed bringing trees onto farms as its top ‘game-changer’ in post-Brexit land-use policy.<sup>16</sup>

As the UK leaves the EU, we can map the way to a better countryside – one that is greener and more productive, offering better livelihoods. We can leave the CAP and create a CCP – a Common Countryside Policy – that truly works for all. It is an opportunity we must not miss.

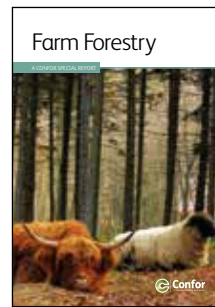
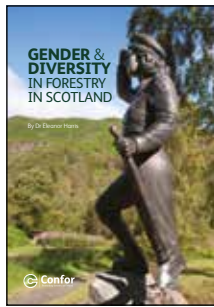
## Contact Confor



Confor: promoting forestry and wood represents more than 1500 businesses across the UK. Its members cover the entire supply chain, from nurseries through to sawmills and beyond.

Confor promotes sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses through political engagement, market promotion and supporting its members' competitiveness.

It produces regular videos and publications on the big issues:



## FOOTNOTES

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