

Uplands Alliance

A network for England's Uplands

Creating a Brighter Future Project

Notes of meeting with Exmoor Hill Farming Network held on Wednesday 3rd July 2019 at Exford Social Club

Welcome and introductions

Welcome and introductions were given by Dave Knight, Chairman of the Exmoor Hill Farming Network.

13 farmers attended the meeting

Other attendees included:

- Tom Lewis, Defra
- Katherine Williams, Exmoor Hill Farm Network
- Nigel Stone, Uplands Alliance

Farmers' 'worst fears' and 'best hopes' when the UK leaves the EU

- We could be in for a jackpot where we earn a lot from sheep and cattle and have favourable values for environmental schemes that boost uplands profitability, or it could go the other way.
- It would be positive to have more stability with a slower rate of change so that people can move and make decisions without having to rush.
- We should not be accepting lesser welfare standards for meat, for example, to match US standards.
- Worst fear is that the bottom will fall out of the livestock trade. When we went into the EU, prices went up a lot.
- Agri-environment works needs money plus locally based staff (NE), better rapport and understanding, more trust. It would be a shame to lose the good work that has been done so far.
- [Agri-environment] schemes are a vital part of farm income and can be seen as a form of diversification.
- My fear is that we "crash and burn", my best hope is that prices go up.
- No deal implications – if politicians go for the cheap option of importing food, a lot of farmers round here will go to the wall.
- When we are tight for money, we don't employ people, which has an impact of the villages.

- Worst fear is of the community being lost on Exmoor after being built up over generations. People will have to leave and communities dwindle.
- Best hopes, we can carry on and there is farming on Exmoor and farmers are wanted by government. The public appreciate what is being delivered when they visit Exmoor.
- Worst fears – we are sold out in trade deals and prices drop.
- Worst fear – the new scheme doesn't pay for whatever is already being delivered. Our plans for wood pasture are already being implemented and we couldn't survive if the payments are taken away.
- In the best case, I hope that farmers will mobilise and not just sit there and take it. The public think farmers are getting money for nothing and are cruel to animals and don't care for the environment.
- It's okay to support farmers but how will they be supported? If the focus is on production, then the farmers working on the environment will lose out.
- Best hope is that we aim to be more like France, where the public love their farmers and buy local produce, and the villages have butchers and bakeries.
- We need to fight the idea that all farmers are the same and we are all like the barley barons with monocultures and no hedges. So we need to work out how to differentiate ourselves as hill farmers. For example, a pilot scheme of the Exmoor Ambition would help to sell what we are doing outside Exmoor.
- Farmers are poor at self-promotion.
- We don't get many from city centres so we need to work harder to get people, and children, out to National Parks.
- It's a shame about the loss of education access from Countryside Stewardship as you only get it in Higher Tier.
- Education is important, and where food comes from and who grows it should be part of the curriculum.
- Exmoor National Park Authority is going for the high-end and £60 plus 'experiences' which is the wrong emphasis. [One of the group responded that her experience was that people who do attend farm-based events do respond very positively].
- We need to promote farmers and engage and be nice to visitors. Use signage to say what we produce on farms including farm produce and carbon etc. [Comment received after the meeting – *“we think signage would be a mistake. We wanted to say so, but the conversation moved on. An ‘official’ scheme like that could easily backfire and get a lot of criticism for being visually intrusive, ‘preachy’ and patronising.”*]
- My fears are politicians and a change of government; a lack of understanding in Defra on the practical needs of farms, and inconsistency in environment schemes where the focus changes after 10 years.
- In any future agri-environment schemes it's really important that farmers believe in what they are being asked to do and can see the point of it, otherwise they will stop as soon as funding comes to an end and public money will have been wasted.
- I live in hope that we make up our mind about what is a public good. Food is most important and the environment depends on livestock farming.
- My worst fear is civil war and the break-up of the UK following a no deal Brexit. Or Corby gets in and there is land nationalisation.

- The best case is that we stay in the EU or, get a good deal and an environment scheme along the lines of the Exmoor Ambition.
- Should we subsidise home grown food? Currently, the better food is eaten by the more well-off and not the low paid. How do we address this to get better health and less obesity?
- Best case – Defra picks up the Exmoor Ambition.
- It would be nice to have a national plan across all political parties on agriculture and other matters so that we are not flip-flopping.
- No-one has mentioned global warming, the elephant in the room. We need to do something and farmers have the ability to fight climate change.
- How do we get reliable scientific evidence about the best way to lock up carbon and the impacts of different types of land management on greenhouse gas emissions? Trees need to keep growing to keep storing carbon. Pasture stores carbon but is there a limit to how much, and are the positive contributions of pasture offset by the negative impacts of ruminants that graze it? [There followed some discussion about the best way to store carbon and the role of pasture]
- It would be helpful to have information available on land use and climate change on the Defra website.
- It was pointed out that on the Knepp Estate in West Sussex, livestock are essential to the rewilding project.
- Worst fear is that an unfavourable trade deal will impact on the community. Already, within a generation, half the farms have been lost in parts of Exmoor.
- Best hope is that we see British produce, especially lamb, available all over the world and we stop moaning and take the opportunities as an industry.

Environmental Land Management Scheme

Tom Lewis introduced Defra's initial thoughts regarding the proposed ELMS when the UK leaves the EU. Key aspects included:

- Defra is at an early stage in its thinking and there is a need to have farmers at the heart of the scheme
- [Defra] doesn't want land management plans to be too bureaucratic
- There is a need to get the advice and guidance right
- We want to incentivise collaboration
- New approaches are being trialled, for example, reverse auctions / net gain from development / payment by results.

Points raised in the discussion:

- There is an issue of scale and impact, we need to aggregate to assess the impact, for example, through collaborative land plans
- Support for shelterbelts would be brilliant as they provide shelter and stop run-off.
- The Exmoor Ambition puts the power back into farmers' hands to decide what we want to deliver over the farm as a whole.

- Success depends on the price of livestock – I would not be so keen to go into the scheme and be tied down if prices were high.
- [Payment rates and agreement duration] need to consider the ability to manage land against the long-term commitment such as through tree planting or coastal realignment.
- Need to have landscape scale aspect alongside farm scale to encourage certain activities over a larger area.
- A criticism is that the scheme is separating livestock farming and the environment and it needs to capture that food production is a positive.
- What about the farms that are providing the benefits already and do not need to do much to maintain those benefits – how will the scheme pay for this? We want to get away from penalising farmers who are doing a good job and paying them less, and pay for the environmental benefit of that land.
- Would there be a break clause in the agreement? It seems logical that the scheme enables farmers to farm and change the contract.
- There needs to be flexibility over timescales and in responding if things don't work or the goals are changed.
- Need capital payments throughout – not turning the tap on and off.
- Will there be rolling contracts?
- 32 farmers are ready to go on Exmoor with the Exmoor Ambition and many more will be interested too, especially if the existing scheme holders join in.
- Farmers want to make it work and want to work with Defra to make it work.
- Monitoring and evaluation are fundamental so we can communicate what is being delivered to The Treasury and the public.
- Has this scheme been discussed with the EU in case we stay in? [Response- Yes, some discussions are being held and there is interest within the EU in the UK approach]

Thanks given and meeting ended.

NS requested that people give consent if they are happy for the Uplands Alliance to communicate directly with them by email, and undertook to circulate the notes as soon as possible.

Comments received after the meeting:

- The goal posts must not change, to avoid the unfairness experienced by farmers in schemes like HLS where early entrants found it easier to get an agreement and received much more money for a wider variety of things than later entrants because the money ran out.