

Introduction

In NI, farming and land use will be pivotal in delivering a better future. If we get it right, we can support thriving rural businesses to bring nature back to our countryside, safeguard against flooding, reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions and lock up more carbon in our hedges, woodlands and soils. Nature-friendly farmers stand ready to deliver the transformational changes essential to providing the future we desperately need.

Our manifesto outlines the essential building blocks to secure a fair and prosperous future for farming. It consists of the following key asks

- **An Agriculture Act for NI**
- **Mainstreaming nature-friendly farming**
- **Nature-friendly farming at the heart of climate action**
- **A land use strategy for Northern Ireland**
- **Investment in sustainable, nature-friendly food systems**
- **Education on food, farming and nature**

An Agriculture Act for NI

Primary legislation will be essential in delivering the change needed to restore nature, reduce emissions, increase carbon storage and sequestration, and help farmers and land managers transition to more sustainable and profitable business models. A Bill should outline a clear purpose for future agriculture funding, principally rewarding activities that serve to restore and enhance nature and the environment. It must set out a clear transition from current policies to the next, providing certainty and clarity to farmers allowing sufficient time to plan and adapt. An Act must be in place by the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Mainstreaming nature-friendly farming

Every farm can be nature-friendly, but often, they need support to do it. The new Farming with Nature package should act as the key delivery vehicle for future farm support and should be funded to the scale of environmental needs¹. It should pay for activities that deliver demonstrable benefits to nature and the environment and go above what is expected as part of good practice. Schemes should be open to all farmers and coupled with dedicated farm business advice to deliver the highest quality environmental outcomes. Other support schemes and advice should also be implemented to help improve profitability productivity and for farmers to invest in the necessary changes to deliver a more sustainable future.

Nature-friendly farming at the heart of climate action

Farming and Land use have a crucial role to play in meeting Net Zero. All farmers can help secure this ambition with the right support and investment. In the next Assembly term, sectoral plans will be

¹ Research estimates that the total funding allocated towards environmental land management in NI equates to roughly £188 million per annum an eight-fold uplift on current investment

developed to help more farmers reduce their emissions and improve the standing of their businesses. Climate action plans for farming and land use must clearly recognise the value of nature-friendly farming in achieving emissions reductions, building carbon storage and sequestration and helping farmers transition to more nature-friendly, profitable business models. This means supporting farming practices that work more closely with natural processes to produce food and other goods from the land rather than an approach focused solely on improving efficiencies in production. The Just Transition Fund for agriculture, committed under the NI Climate Act, must help support a pathway to genuine, nature-friendly farming.

A land use strategy for Northern Ireland

Land is a finite resource and must be used carefully; changes in land use could deliver significant benefits in one area but could have negative impacts in another. There is a clear need for a more strategic, spatial approach to land use, which targets the right interventions in the right place to deliver multiple benefits for nature, climate and people while avoiding potential trade-offs and unintended consequences. A land use strategy for Northern Ireland should be developed alongside an NI agriculture Bill to ensure that interventions rewarded under new farming schemes deliver the outcomes the land is best to provide.

Investment in sustainable, nature-friendly food & farming systems

We need a system that ensures farmers earn a fair return whilst ensuring that food (and other products from our land) is healthy, affordable and sustainably produced. Public procurement rules should prioritise buying local food directly from NI farmers where possible and give preference to farmers with established nature-friendly farming practices. Local food infrastructure should be developed, such as facilitating local abattoirs, on-farm butchering and manufacturing facilities. Local food hubs should be developed to connect local farmers and producers with consumers - transparency in a shorter food supply chain may help reconnect people with where their food is produced and how it shapes the environment.

Upscale education on food, farming and nature

There's a disconnect between customers and farmers and a lack of understanding of what is good or bad for nature and the environment. We need to educate people about where their food comes from and the positive environmental, social and economic impacts of nature-friendly farming systems. Our school and college curriculums should include food, farming and nature. Reconnecting people with farms and their food through school visits, community education, and workshops on local farms can also help drive change. It should form an essential part of future farming policy. With this, more can be done to mainstream nature-friendly farming in agriculture colleges and universities, making it a core component of future agricultural education. This will ensure that the farmers of the future can thrive as part of a future policy with nature and the environment at its heart.

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