

Interview with Farming Today – Thursday 22 February

Interviewer: Redacted – Section 40

Location: Zoom (link to follow on Thursday morning)

Pre-record of around 10 minutes.

Date and Time: 4pm, Thursday, 22 February

Press Officer attending: Redacted – Section 40

Background: Farming Today have asked for an interview on the Sustainable Farming Scheme and the concerns raised by farmers.

Top Line:

- Working in partnership with the farming sector is key. That is why the Sustainable Farming Scheme has been jointly developed with farmers.
- The scheme is currently out for consultation and we would like to thank the thousands of farmers who have already responded and attended the 10 Welsh Government Roadshow sessions across Wales.
- No final decision will be taken on the scheme until after the consultation has ended and we encourage everyone to reply with their views by 7 March.
- As the consultation enters its final two weeks I would urge people to take part and make sure their views are heard.

If pressed on consultation:

- This is a genuine consultation and no decisions will be taken on any element of the proposal, including how we achieve the requirement for habitat and trees, until we have conducted a full analysis of the consultation responses. As I've said, I fully expect to make some changes to the proposals as a result of the consultation. We are listening and we will consider all responses.

Meeting with the Unions

- I meet with the farming unions regularly and I wanted to have a meeting as soon as possible after our Sustainable Farming Scheme roadshows and theirs had been completed.
- I'd like to thank them for joining me on Monday, it was good to hear the feedback they had from their events. We will consider this in addition to the feedback we've noted from our events.
- Many of the issues discussed were common with those we heard from the 3,200 farmers who've attended the Welsh Government events.
- I reiterated to them this is a genuine consultation. It is still open, and I would continue to urge people to take part and give us their views. We will consider every response.
- Once the consultation is over I will receive a detailed analysis of the responses, and as I've said before I would expect to make changes to the scheme as a result.

- It is vitally important people take part in the consultation. Please do find time to respond as your views matter.

Sustainable Farming Scheme Key Brief

Introduction and Roadshow

- The Sustainable Farming Scheme aims to secure food production systems, keep farmers farming the land, safeguard the environment, and address the urgent call of the climate and nature emergency.
- The Sustainable Farming Scheme has been designed to best contribute to the four Sustainable Land Management objectives included in the Agriculture (Wales) Act – passed unanimously by the Senedd. These recognise the positive benefits which come from generations of farming traditions in Wales and the need to respond to some immediate challenges such as climate change.
- We know farmers are anxious about change. This is why officials ran a series of farmer roadshows around Wales raising awareness of the consultation and speaking to farmers from all sectors and all areas.

Notes; - Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

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- I have met with representatives from the Farming Unions to gain direct feedback on the consultation events which they have been holding with their members.
- If pushed – the roadshow presentations only cover a selection of the Universal Actions due to time restrictions but officials have responded to questions on all of the Actions. And outside of the presentations, officials have been available to talk to farmers about all aspects of the scheme.

Communications – have we had the communications right on the Sustainable Farming Scheme?

- The SFS has been designed to support what our farmers can do best, sustainable farming and producing high quality food in harmony with the environment
- The climate and nature emergencies threaten the sustainability of agriculture and present the most serious risk to food security both globally and locally.
- We must respond to this if we are to ensure we have a sustainable and resilient agriculture sector for generations to come.
- Farmers and stakeholder organisations have always been part of the SFS design process. They were crucial in the co-design phases with over 1600 contributions (mainly from farmers) in response to our proposals from 2022.
- This co-design informed the recent consultation where we listened to their concern and made significant changes. For example, moving from a 5 year contract to an annual approach to ensure tenants with less certainty of tenure could be included. Also, no Actions now need to be completed in advance of joining the scheme.
- I agree that engagement and communication is crucial. We've held 10 Roadshows (30 presentation sessions) across Wales, speaking to over 3,200 farmers. We met face to face with the Farming Unions and other stakeholders regularly,

- I am always keen to listen, and that consultation is meaningful. I expect to be making changes to the Scheme as a consequence of the feedback.
- Communications is key and we will continue to engage with our farmers. We want as many of them to feed their views into the consultation and we've been very clear on that.

If pressed on whether we should pause the consultation

- We are continuing with the consultation as it is important we receive views from farmers, those involved in the agricultural industry and wider public, on the scheme before a final decision is made

Scheme Design

- We have developed a Scheme which is designed to support all farmers in Wales through a Universal Baseline Payment, based on the completion of a set of Universal Actions. These Actions will be familiar to farmers in Wales, whether beef, dairy, arable, upland, lowland, extensive or intensive. They are actions many of them take on a day to day basis.
- The Scheme has been designed to support those farming the land, active farmers.
- We propose to remove restrictions such as entitlements. This makes it easy for existing farmers and those new to the industry, such as young farmers, to be able to enter the scheme and gain support.
- The Scheme is designed to recognise and support these Actions through advice and a financial payment, therefore improving the resilience and efficiency of farms in Wales.
- Many farmers are already undertaking some of the Universal Actions such as benchmarking and soil testing. We are proposing to recognise this, where possible, and not ask farmers to duplicate work and complete a new set of actions for us.
- We will also be introducing Actions which allows those who want to go further to do so through Optional and Collaborative Actions which will complement the Universal Scheme through additional payments. These will be progressively introduced from 2025.

Climate Change and Trees

- Food production is vital, but the climate emergency is the main risk to food production over the long term, and our natural ecosystems are the best defence we have in the adaptation and mitigation of climate change. We cannot keep having separate conversations about food versus the environment – they are dependent on each other.

- We have to start taking steps now to reduce the impacts of climate change over the coming decades. We want our future generations to be producing top quality food in Wales, but they will be farming in very different conditions to today.
- The Scheme has been designed to help farmers respond to these challenges and help us to meet our commitments to the people of Wales.
- We know that the 10% tree cover requirement has been the most controversial element of the proposals. But trees are only one part of the proposals designed to sequester more carbon, and we recognise the importance of maintaining carbon stocks in soils and grassland.
- We want to see trees built into the farming system and we continue to explore where additional tree planting can be an asset to the farm such as shelterbelts against increasingly erratic weather, so that it is not a choice of trees or producing food. We will provide financial support for those who may need to plant additional trees, and recognise that this can come with restrictions. We continue to review these consequences, such as changes in land value to see what can be done to remove or mitigate them.
- Farmers have told us where they think tree planting is not appropriate, for example on tenanted land where the landlord has retained responsibility for them. We have listened to this and have now removed these areas in our proposals.
- The 10% tree cover requirement will not be introduced until 2030, so those who may need to consider further action have time to do so. We will not apply any retrospective penalty on SFS payments if farmers have not met the requirement by 2030.

Consultation and Payment

- The SFS consultation closes 7 March.
- It is a genuine consultation. We will listen to what farmers have to say about what works well in the scheme and what might need changing. I know officials are already considering changes, for example around the inclusion of stone walls and changes to the Continuous Personal Development (CPD) online training. This has come from listening to the views of farmers at the roadshows.
- I realise farmers are frustrated that we have not published the payment rates, but we can only do this once the scheme has been finalised. The consultation sets out how we intend to incorporate the costs and time of farmers to complete the Universal Actions in determining the payment rate.
- I am also committed to recognise the wider benefits which come from farming, such as our language, culture the landscape and natural environment through a social value payment (on top of costs incurred/income foregone). Determining how to do this is not easy as it is not common practice, but we will continue to

work with our Farming Unions and other stakeholders to find the appropriate mechanisms to achieve this.

- In the meantime, the Stability Payment farmers will be able to receive during the Transition Period (2025-2029) will ensure the level of support from the Universal scheme is greater than should they choose to remain in BPS.
- The Scheme has been redesigned so that none of the Universal Actions need to be completed before entering the scheme. Farmers will have time to consider if this voluntary scheme is the right thing for them once we have finalised the scheme details and published the payment rates. This will be later this year, in the summer.
- The economic assessment published alongside the consultation is an important piece of work which helped inform our consultation, however it is not an assessment of the current consultation. It has helped to identify the potential risks of the scheme, such as a potential drop in agricultural output which we are addressing. For example the assessment assumed grazing restrictions on woodland and habitat, which we now propose to remove.
- This current consultation is the result of two previous consultations, two phases of co-design and a Scheme Outline published in 2022. We have refined these proposals thanks to the input of farmers.

Bovine TB

Lines to take for TB:

- I have seen the devastation a TB breakdown brings to farming families and businesses. The on-farm slaughter of TB reactors, although sometimes unavoidable, can be particularly distressing to witness.
- In many cases on-farm slaughter is unavoidable if cattle cannot be transported to an abattoir for animal welfare reasons, or if they are unfit for human consumption.
- As I announced in my [November Statement](#), and reiterated in plenary discussions, I want the bovine TB Technical Advisory Group (TAG), once established, to consider the policy of on-farm slaughter as a priority. Applications for appointment to the TAG are currently being considered.
- The mental health of those involved in the agricultural industry is of great concern to me. I would strongly encourage anyone suffering with stress or other mental health issues to speak to an expert in this field.
- The Welsh Government works with industry led and third sector organisations such as Farm Community Network (FCN), Tir Dewi, and the DPJ Foundation as well as the FCN run FarmWell information Hub. These organisations provide excellent services to help support keepers who contact them.
- Our Programme for Government makes clear we will not cull badgers. Studies have shown cattle-to-cattle transmission rates are greater than badger-to-cattle. There are ways farmers can limit the introduction of TB into their herds through good biosecurity. This includes measures such as limiting badger contact and reducing the risk of buying in infected cattle. It is important for farmers to discuss such measures with their vet.
- Government cannot eradicate TB alone. Partnership working with our farmers and vets is crucial to reach our shared goal of a TB-free Wales.
- In March 2023 I launched a new 5-year Delivery Plan which sets out policy direction going forward under the steer of our Chief Veterinary Officer.
- On 14th November 2023, I made an oral statement about the TB Eradication Programme.
- Renewed Programme Governance will be central to taking TB eradication forward and applications to a new Programme Board and Technical Advisory Group are currently being reviewed as part of the public appointments process.
- A key aspect of the programme going forward is the review of farmer support and engagement and in particular the future of Cymorth TB.

- The Welsh-Government funded Pembrokeshire Project commenced in 2023. It is working in collaboration with industry to empower vets and farmers to make informed decisions and show leadership in TB control.
- While overall across Wales we are seeing progress in tackling bovine TB, with new herd incidents decreasing over the long-term, we fully recognise the TB situation varies across different parts of Wales, which is why we are taking a targeted approach. Every individual TB breakdown is distressing and has a huge impact on the farmer concerned, which cannot be underestimated.
- On 1 February 2024, Pre-Movement Testing of cattle or other bovine animals located in the Low TB Area (LTBA) of Wales was re-introduced. This change was made in response to an increase in the local spread of TB in the LTBA, some of which was due to legal localised movements of untested cattle.
- I am very aware of the distressing impact of bovine TB on the health and well-being of our farmers and their families. This is why we are absolutely determined to eradicate bovine TB in Wales as set out in our Delivery Plan.

Agricultural Pollution

- The majority of farmers in Wales truly value our environment and want to protect it.
- They recognise regulations are needed to protect the environment from poor practice, which is causing considerable damage to the reputation of the sector. They also understand that other sectors are heavily regulated in comparison.
- The regulations we have introduced are based on good practice recommendations and mirror farm assurance requirements, which have been implemented by farms for decades.
- We will shortly be reviewing the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations.
- As part of that review, we will consider the challenges which have been raised by the sector. The protection and recovery of the environment and the reputation and long-term sustainability of the sector must be at the forefront of any policy decisions going forward.
- We would urge anyone who is unclear what the Regulations will mean for them to get in touch with one of the many sources of support available. Advice, guidance and support is available from our website, from Farming Connect or the dedicated technical helpline.
- Welsh Government remains committed, through the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru, to working with the farming community in the deployment of

the regulations to improve water and air quality, taking an approach targeted at those activities known to cause pollution.

- In line with this commitment and following concerns raised by the sector, I introduced a time-limited Enhanced Nutrient Management (ENM) approach. This will enable farms, where appropriate, to continue to apply a higher amount of livestock manure to their land until January 2025.
- This change demonstrates I am listening to the concerns of the sector and willing to act where it is appropriate to do so.

Net Zero Wales - Agriculture

Lines to take

- Welsh agriculture is at the heart of many of our rural communities. Our high standards in food and farming are key to our response to the climate emergency and our plans for enhancing biodiversity.
- Our future generations will be farming in much more challenging conditions, and we must act today to adapt and mitigate for this.
- This is why the Welsh Government published its Net Zero Wales Plan to set out the pathway to net zero by 2050. It describes how the actions of many will put us on the path to net zero and a greener, stronger, fairer Wales.
- We are continuing to work on the policies and proposals laid out in Net Zero Wales as we finalise our work on Carbon Budget 2 and are continuing to explore future policies for agriculture as we look ahead to the targets set out in Carbon Budget 3.
- We know agriculture and food production rely on natural processes and so will always cause some degree of greenhouse gas emissions, but land is also a store of carbon in soils, peatland, trees, and hedgerows. The sector also offer a range of potential opportunities to sequester and store further carbon through forestry, soil, and peatlands.
- Our current agricultural emissions are largely dominated by enteric fermentation (largely from cattle and sheep) and manure management, with fertilisers and fuel for agricultural machinery also contributing to the sector's carbon footprint.
- Agriculture in Wales will have to adapt and use all available low emission technologies throughout the whole sector (such as minimising inputs, maximising efficiencies and outputs, precision farming and optimal slurry and manure usage and storage) to address these emissions.
- Transitioning to net zero in agriculture is a technical, cultural and societal challenge and the sector will need significant support to ensure it is equipped with the skills and knowledge to enable a just and timely transition within the rural community.
- The Welsh Government will work with and support farmers and land managers through this transition and I welcome the excellent work already being done by farmers to decarbonise their farms.

- The challenge of climate change requires everyone to work together across geographic and sectoral boundaries, and collaboration is essential if we are going to be successful.

Background, inc headline stats

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

Media line on whether Minister will meet leaders of the meetings – after motion was passed at Carmarthen

- We can confirm we have offered a meeting

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