

EUROPEAN YOUNG FARMERS DAY

“What future for our agriculture?”

Role of agriculture as a provider of public goods

The Contribution of Farming to Protecting the Landscape of the Countryside

1. It is the view of CPRE, underlining this brief presentation, that the nature, techniques and objectives of farming practice have a decisive influence upon the quality and character of the rural landscape. Since the early 1940s, public policy in England has encouraged the intensification and increased efficiency of production in conventional ways. Although that process has to a limited extent been reversed through the Second Pillar of the CAP since the late 1980s, the dominant effect on the agricultural and forestry landscape remains the erosion and reduction of much of the stock of features (both semi-natural and historic or archaeological) which give different parts of England their distinctive appearance. This effect can be seen across the majority of farm land in most other EU states.

2. There is and will continue to be pressure to neglect or reduce the remaining long established traditional features of agricultural landscapes as competitive pressures on agricultural markets grow, as the number of farmers declines and EU financial support for farming is reduced. A key question is whether or not we regard the distinctive landscapes of traditional farming and forestry as valuable things in themselves. It is important to acknowledge that these landscapes need to be productive to retain their valued qualities, but that they are often entirely uneconomic to manage in the ways that have generated their distinctive features and with the lower productivity associated with the retention of traditional practices. As farming practices change or farming is abandoned, it is important to retain the aspects of farmed landscapes of public importance wherever we can.

3. The survival of traditional farmed landscapes into the 21st century has created the opportunity for society to benefit from other aspects of the associated agricultural activity. The richness and diversity of traditionally farmed landscapes provides very significant attraction for tourists and visitors, drawn by the recognisable and distinctive character of different kinds of countryside. Wildlife habitats and populations, historic elements in the landscape and rural settlements made attractive by surrounding traditional agricultural landscapes benefit likewise. In a largely prosperous European society, many of these benefits are highly valued and wisely thought worth protecting and retaining through the encouragement of traditional farming or farming which manages to integrate innovative agriculture with retention of traditional landscapes. But to ensure their long term survival, the essential role of traditional farming needs to be recognised and its future secured.

The role of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)

4. CPRE was set up in response to the accelerating pace of threats to the English countryside in the 1920s. Initially, these were urbanising threats, partly encouraged by a depressed agricultural economy. But since the 1940s, the modernisation and intensification of agricultural production has generated a need for oversight of the effects of these policies on the quality of the countryside. Although CPRE was not established to engage in agricultural policy development, this has become an increasingly important part of our work. More than 75% of the land surface of England (9.2m hectares) is in agricultural use and the exact nature and the effects of that use make decisive contributions to the retention, loss or change in the character of rural landscapes. CPRE is concerned over the unpredictable effects of increasingly globalised trading, the uncertainty over and likely ending of direct financial support for farming and the social changes which appear to be reducing the succession of the next generation of farmers in much of Europe. In turn, this is likely to affect the capacity of

English agriculture to manage and maintain the landscapes and habitats which are so highly valued.

5. CPRE aims to help people to protect their local landscapes from threats both to their extent and their quality. We also, wherever possible, are committed to making it easier for landscapes to be enhanced, together with their wildlife, historic monuments and public access. We recognise the essential importance of the productive use of land in order to retain the characteristics which are valued. But we also recognise the need for careful reconciliation between the level of intensity and efficiency of management needed for farming practices to be viable and that which does not gradually erode the landscape texture and detail which society wishes to retain. This can only be resolved successfully by making provision for public financial support for those aspects of agricultural land management which are uneconomic. Private enterprise and enthusiasm are vital ingredients in the solution, but if relied upon alone, the results will be far less coherent and probably much less extensive.

6. We are concerned to secure as far as possible, the qualities of beauty and diversity through farming on behalf of the whole population? Part of the solution lies with the reconciliation of farming with the efficient use of land and the increasing demand, and need, for high quality food. An efficient use of land includes well planned development which minimised the amount of farm land used and the careful combining of different uses for the same land (flood plains as nature reserves and open, inspiring landscapes, for example, as well as grazing land). CPRE's recent research work has included analysing the likely outcomes of existing policy directions over the next 30 years, (*Your countryside, your choice*) the qualities of land which give it distinctive character and how to sustain them, (*Lie of the Land*), the relationship between planning, development, retail industry, local businesses farming and the landscape (*The Real Choice*) and a broad scale survey farmers and their contribution to landscape management outside the Pillar 2 grants structure (*Living landscapes: hidden costs of managing the countryside*, with the National Farmers Union).

7. The results of our work show how significant for the future of both farmers and the rural landscape, is the view of the wider public and policy makers responding to them. Farmers need to recognise the need to be good citizens, providing public goods which are clearly identified as such by the electorate. But the wider public also need to recognise just how much we all rely on farmers, their knowledge and their skills, for the continued existence of the landscapes which so many of us value. CPRE is widely recognised for having played a very significant part in the development of public policies which both respect and sustain farming practice and secure and expand the things which the public clearly wants, is willing to pay for and which are a significant part of our cultural identity.

Three strong themes

8. We identify three strong themes across the whole of the EU in relation to the links between farming and the rural landscape:

- The fact that the farmed landscape and its characteristic landscapes are **an enduring fact of life**; we will be left with the consequences of our decisions for generations to come
- The power and potential for human well-being of celebrating **the common experience** of productive use of land and the resulting character of landscapes, often linking places very far apart within Europe and beyond
- The role of the farmed landscape and agricultural activity in bequeathing us our **cultural inheritance and identity**, despite huge changes to society in many other spheres

These sweeping themes are in the final analysis, founded on the physical actions of managing the agricultural landscape. The character and nature of production from each and every farm holding is a composition of specific actions and practices, rather than an alchemical result of payments, political wrangling and bureaucracy. CPRE has specific responsibility for landscape, so we are always aware of what, exactly, leads to the creation of any landscape. The European Landscape Convention provides a useful definition of the term: “*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*”. Agriculture and forestry dominate those actions and inter-actions and unlike any other processes, involve intimate and sustained use of the same things (annual and perennial plants, grasses, shrubs, fruit trees and forest trees, as well as the animals derived from the original natural ecosystems which have become farm land.

9. This presentation ends with a brief overview of some of the principal management practices and resulting features which make up the English farmed landscape and those of much of the rest of European farmed landscapes besides. If farmed landscapes are to have a future, we need to ensure that the motivation, skills and capacity of the farming community to do these things are still there. No-one should be in any doubt as to the cultural significance to Europe, as well as the importance to wildlife and habitats, of securing this future. Least of all the Young Farmers of Europe, on whom so much responsibility rests and who are acting on behalf of the vast majority of us who are not farmers. The task is an elevating and inspiring one, to which we should be all make our best contribution.

CPRE
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