

A time for environmentally friendly policies?

Centre for Brexit Studies Academics have contributed to another Bite-Size Brexit book which aims to put an industry which has been somewhat forgotten in the Brexit debate into the frame: Agriculture.

Farmageddon? Brexit and British Agriculture, edited by Caroline Stocks and John Mair, explores both paths that Brexit could mean for Agriculture in the UK. Being an underexplored issue in the 'Great Brexit Debate', the book remedies that and puts the industry, which will impact a huge amount of businesses across Britain, into the spotlight.

Brexit could offer an opportunity for British Agriculture post Brexit, free of the Common Agricultural Policy. It could also be a disaster with export markets lost, subsidies and bankruptcies. But which one will it be?

We are delighted to share Dr Viviane Gravey's chapter in the book on the blog today, enjoy...

A time for environmentally friendly policies?

“Enhancing our natural environment is a vital mission for this Government. We are committed to ensuring we leave the environment in a better condition than we found it. And leaving the European Union allows us to deliver the policies required to achieve that – to deliver a Green Brexit. (...). It means we don't need any longer to follow the path dictated by the Common Agricultural Policy. We can have our own – national – food policy, our own agriculture policy, our own environment policies, our own economic policies, shaped by our own collective interests.” – Michael Gove, Oxford Farming Conference, 2018

Among the acrimonious Brexit debates, one issue is proving surprisingly consensual: leaving the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and replacing it with a set of policies better suited to UK farmers and to the UK's environment.

From the Green movement, to the Leave campaign and the Government, replacing the CAP is presented as a major Brexit dividend. But how will future UK agriculture policies deliver for the environment? To understand what is possible to achieve, we need to study how we got there (the CAP and its environmental impacts), to reflect on the various policies already existing (through devolution) and to analyse the environmental credentials of future agriculture policy plans in the UK's four nations.

The past: the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and the environment

The Common Agricultural Policy was set up in the late 1950s with the intent to boost agricultural production in Europe, provide decent incomes for farmers and fair prices for consumers.

In its first three decades, the CAP used a price support system: if agricultural products started trading below a certain politically-agreed price, the European authorities would start to buy up excess production on the European market and subsidise exports on the international market.

This price support system, together with subsidies for access to new technologies, led to a profound intensification of agriculture throughout the continent.

Intensification of agriculture led to a sharp fall in the number of workers in the agricultural sector, and to the number of farms, as smaller ones merged to become larger operations. According to Eurostat, half a million people worked in farming in the UK in 1973, down to 300, 000 in 2018, while in France over that same period there was a drop from more than two million to 700 000.

It saw the rise of monocultures and the creation of larger, more uniform fields with a sharp decline in hedgerows and trees on agricultural land (in France, 75 per cent of hedges were lost over the 20th century).

From the late 1970s, environmental impacts of intensification became apparent, with evidence of river and air pollution, soil erosion and a catastrophic drop in the number of farmland birds (-56 per cent

between 1970 and 2016 across the UK) and insects, with growing talks of an 'insect armageddon'.

In the face of both better understanding of farming impacts on the environment and a growing backlash against the policy, the CAP was reformed repeatedly in the 1990s and 2000s, aiming — amongst other objectives — to foster environmentally-friendly forms of agriculture. This took two different forms: first, raising the minimum environmental standards for all farmers; and second, making it easier for farmers to go above and beyond and deliver for the environment.

Under the latest 2014-2020 CAP, cross-compliance and the green payment fall under this the first type of environmental support, aiming at raising the baseline, while agri-environment and climate payments fall under this second, more ambitious type.

Critically, despite these policy changes, agriculture in the EU continues to have a negative impact on the environment. Water pollution has, at best, hit a plateau (with growing concerns around pesticides in water supply) and biodiversity loss continues. This raises key questions for policy-makers in the UK after Brexit: if they are really intent on leaving the environment in a better condition, what do they need to do so they can they succeed where the EU failed?

The present: Before Brexit, how do the four UK nations address environmental challenges?

While the CAP is often criticised as a 'one size fits all' policy, it has become increasingly diverse over the last 20 years, offering member states a menu of options to choose from. In the UK, this greater flexibility has been seized upon by the four nations. Since devolution in the late 1990s, there are four interpretations of the CAP in the UK. Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland have each made different choices when it comes to supporting environmentally-friendly farming, and so did their closest neighbour, Ireland. This reflects the huge variation in terms of farming conditions and practices across the UK.

For example, Ireland chose to have no minimum claim size, meaning very small farms can receive support. Conversely, there are minimum claim sizes in the UK, with five hectares in England and Wales, and

three hectares in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Ireland and Scotland both re-introduced coupled support, i.e. subsidies directly-linked to production types and levels (in Scotland, this coupled support is for beef calves and hill sheep) but Wales, England and Northern Ireland did not.

Finally, agri-environment-climate payments represent close to 70 per cent of English expenditures on rural development plans, but a much lower proportion in the rest of the UK (21 per cent in Northern Ireland, 25 per cent in Wales, 19 per cent in Scotland) and in Ireland (38 per cent). These figures on their own are not sufficient to claim that England is the most supportive part of the UK for environmentally friendly agriculture; this is because different parts of the UK favour different ways of supporting agriculture.

Scotland, for example, offers extensive support to farms in areas facing natural constraints (such as upland areas). Nevertheless, when it comes to the CAP's flagship environment scheme, higher level agri-environment-climate schemes, a stark picture emerges: their uptake in 2017 was much more important in England (with 1.4m hectares) and Scotland (with one million hectares) than Wales (400 000 hectares) and Northern Ireland (100,000 hectares).

The future beyond the CAP – four policies for a green agriculture?

The first Defra secretary after the referendum, Andrea Leadsom, put the emphasis on getting rid of CAP 'red tape', singling out the two policy instruments which define the environmental baseline for farming in the UK: cross-compliance and greening payments. Her successor since June 2017, Michael Gove, adopted a much more environmentally-friendly discourse, putting the idea of 'public money for public goods' at the heart of future policy. This divergence is a stark reminder that once out of the EU, the direction of agricultural policy is likely to change much more frequently and more radically too.

What are the plans for the UK? On funding, we know that farming will continue to be funded at the same level until the end of this Parliament (2022 or before). Between now and then starts a period of 'agricultural transition' in which funds are gradually redirected to new objectives – this transition would end in the late 2020s.

Concerning the environment, we can note some key similarities and divergences between the four nations. First, all four nations favour the use of pilots and trials to test new policy instruments. Second, all favour a shift towards paying for environmentally-friendly outcomes – for example, increased biodiversity on the farm – more than for specific farming processes.

Third, all note the importance of training, advice and peer-to-peer support to help deliver new forms of farming. But the environment plays different part in the policy proposals. Under Gove, Defra has devised a policy which would gradually reduce direct payments to free ‘up £150m for the environment and other public goods’. These environmental public goods include improving public access, climate change mitigation, improving air, soil and water quality and increasing biodiversity.

The other proposals do not put such emphasis on public goods – conversely, the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish proposals are keener on ‘keeping farmers on the land and minimising any structural change’.

Finally, the proposals vary when it comes to the level of funding for environmental delivery. Currently, EU agri-environment-climate payments are only funded on the basis of reimbursing the extra cost of environmental action (income foregone and additional costs). Both Wales and Northern Ireland argue environmental effort should be more generously supported while these debates are still ongoing in England and Scotland.

The green Brexit crossroads

Agricultural policy in the UK is at a crossroads – while the UK Government is intent on delivering a green Brexit, agricultural policy is a devolved matter. Reviewing existing policies and proposed plans in all four nations reveals different practices and ways of making farming more sustainable – and arguably different levels of ambition for the environment.

Designing future policy in the UK requires a fine balancing act between recognising the incredible variety of the farming sectors, farmland ecosystems and political priorities across the four nations,

and making sure there is a level playing field for farmers and no race to the bottom for environmental protection.

Farmageddon? Is now available on Amazon. [Find out more here.](#)