

Eustice: supporting farmers ahead of the coming growing season

The Government has announced steps to assist farmers with the availability of fertilisers for the coming growing season to help address uncertainty amongst growers and keep costs down for farmers.

With agricultural commodities closely linked to global gas prices, farmers are facing rising costs for inputs including manufactured fertiliser, due to the process depending on gas.

Environment Secretary, George Eustice has announced that changes to the use of urea fertiliser will be delayed by at least a year. The delay has been made to help farmers manage their costs and give them more time to adapt in the light of a global rise in gas prices leading to pressures on the supply of ammonium nitrate fertilisers. A consultation on restrictions was launched a year ago, in order to reduce ammonia pollution in the air. When restrictions are introduced, they will include the use of ammonia inhibitors rather than a complete ban.

In a move to further support farmers, revised and improved statutory guidance has been published on how farmers should limit the use of slurry and other farmyard manure at certain times of year. This will provide clarity to farmers on how they can use slurry and other manures during autumn and winter to meet agronomic needs. This guidance will provide more clarity and has been developed with farmers and farming bodies.

Farmers will be further supported through new slurry storage grants as of this year, helping meet the Farming Rules for Water and reducing dependence on artificial fertilisers by storing organic nutrients until needed or for onward processing.

Alongside these measures, further details of the Sustainable Farming Incentive have also been published today. Given current fertiliser prices, the priority must be to pioneer new technologies to manufacture more organic-based fertiliser products, and rediscover techniques such as using nitrogen fixing legumes and clovers as an alternative to fertiliser.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive will help farmers move towards sustainable farming practices over time, supporting farmers to build the health and fertility of their soil and to reduce soil erosion which are essential for sustainable food production, helping to bolster food security and the longer term resilience of the sector.

The Government will pay farmers to help them with the costs of sowing nitrogen fixing plants and green manures in their crops or in advance of their crops to substitute some of their fertiliser requirements for the coming season and reduce their dependence on manufactured fertilisers linked to the price of gas.

An industry fertiliser roundtable will also be chaired by the Farming Minister, Victoria Prentis to continue to work on these issues, identify solutions and better understand the impact of current pressures on farmers. The group will meet for the first time this week. In addition, Defra is extending the membership of its longstanding Market Monitoring Group, which involves industry expertise to understand trends in markets.

Environment Secretary, George Eustice, said:

The significant rise in the cost of fertiliser is a reminder that we need to reduce our dependence on manufacturing processes dependent on gas. Many of the challenges we face in agriculture will require a fusion of new technology with conventional principles of good farm husbandry. The measures we have announced today are not the whole solution but will help farmers manage their nitrogen needs in the year ahead.

Over the course of the agricultural transition, legacy EU subsidies on land ownership or tenure are being phased out and replaced with a system that helps farmers invest in their businesses. The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund has recently been almost trebled to over £48 million, and last October the Government launched the Farming Innovation Programme to help farmers and growers boost R&D. A further £20.5 million of these R&D grants has been announced today which will help fund projects aimed at increasing productivity. Projects could include tackling a crop pest or disease that is affecting productivity or a business may work in partnership with researchers to breed new crop species which are more resilient to a changing climate.

Mark Tufnell, President of the Country Land and Business Association said:

Whilst we welcome today's announcements, it is important to recognise the sheer scale of the challenges ahead in the UK's food production.

The exceptionally high price of fertiliser can be mitigated only to a degree by high commodity prices. Some farmers may choose not to spread fertiliser at all this year. But if prices continued to stay at this all-time-high then government will need to urgently consider ways of increasing and diversifying domestic fertiliser production. We hope this will be a central focus of the round table DEFRA has rightly called.

We welcome the news that DEFRA has accepted the industry's advice to allow the continued use of urea within an accreditation scheme, audited by Red Tractor. This gives farmers a greater degree of choice when purchasing fertiliser.

The announcement of payment rates for the Sustainable Farming Incentive, and additional guidance on the compatibility of the scheme with Countryside Stewardship, goes some way to explaining to farmers the impact of the agricultural transition on their own businesses.

Soil Association Farming Director Liz Bowles said:

We welcome the commitment from ministers to accelerate the reduction in our reliance on artificial nitrogen fertiliser and invest in soil health.

It's vital that we act differently to our post war response in the 1940s by prioritising climate and nature alongside food security. The ongoing damage being done to soils, wildlife, and climate poses the biggest threat to food security and nature-friendly, agroecological farming provides the best path to ensuring long-term resilience.

The transition needed cannot happen overnight, and a step-change in funding for farmer-led research and peer-to-peer learning will be essential. This will help farmers gain the confidence needed to recycle nutrients from livestock or nitrogen-fixing crops like clover in more complex rotations.

We must build on and accelerate the plans to help farmers work with nature that have been set out in the Environmental Land Management schemes – and we look forward to hearing more detail on the upcoming organic standard and the higher level payments for improving soil health.