

Farming and the Environment Agency

The last time I spoke at the NFU conference was at the tail-end of the wettest February on record.

This February, two years later, the Met Office has named three major storms in one week for the first time.

Storms not only bring flooding, but disruption to supply chains, power outages, damage to buildings, trees and hedgerows.

So I'd like to thank you for taking the time to be here now.

I know that many of you will have repairs to make, as well as preparations for Storm Gladys, should she arrive with the same force as Dudley, Eunice and Franklin.

I'd also like to thank Environment Agency colleagues on the ground working around the clock to help communities respond and recover, alongside those working for the emergency services, internal drainage boards and local authorities who have helped with the response.

Events like these are becoming more frequent and severe.

Last year, more than 76,000 incidents were reported to the Environment Agency's incident management service, including flood, drought, fires, fish kills and pollution incidents.

One every seven minutes, 24 hours a day.

The final session today is called "Building Business Resilience", and everyone in society has a shared interest in doing that successfully.

As Chair of the Environment Agency, I have met farmers in drought making tough decisions about what vegetables to grow.

I have met farmers in flood who have had to move livestock and repair damage to farm buildings and fields.

The climate crisis means farmers could be doing both in the same year, perhaps more than once.

The Environment Agency is calling for much stronger focus on adaptation nationally.

Building your business resilience isn't only about avoiding risks, farming is integral to a prosperous future.

So, whether it's recovering after there has been too much water, coping when there is not enough water, or managing soils for a healthy water system, we want to work with you to make the whole country more resilient.

Minette asked me to set out how the Environment Agency wishes to work with farming, as a constructive partner.

And, we want to work with you at every opportunity on environmental improvement, flood management and net zero ambitions.

For me, it starts with collaboration, clarity and consistency.

Leaving the EU gave the UK a chance to change laws and help farmers realise new opportunities.

The much discussed concept of public money for public goods could unlock more productive agriculture, long term food security, increased biodiversity, viable infrastructure and thriving places.

The Environment Agency has been advocating to ensure that farmers can be paid through the Environmental Land Management scheme if the work they are doing upstream can mitigate downstream flooding.

Defra have recently asked us to lead delivery for the first round of Landscape Recovery, "Restoring England's streams and rivers", as part of the Environmental Land Management Scheme.

These projects will restore water bodies, rivers and floodplains to a more natural state, reduce nutrient pollution, benefit aquatic species, reduce flood risk and increase resilience to climate change.

This is an extension to our current role.

It involves extending our legal, financial and delivery responsibilities and will secure additional Future Farming & Countryside Project funding.

To enable the Environment Agency to adopt this new role, Defra will delegate specific powers to make and administer grants under the Agriculture Act 2020.

But for farming to make the most of new opportunities it will need private investment as well as public money.

We increasingly know about the multiple benefits of environmental services.

The question is how to monetise them.

Many farmers are interested in the prospect of being able to sell environmental services that come from improved soil health, be that carbon sequestration, nutrient run-off reduction or greater water retention for flood resilience.

Such markets could be catalytic to farming's future, but investors and farmers need greater certainty about the outcomes and products on sale.

This could come in the form of standards.

We don't have a soil carbon code yet and we would benefit from other standards for nutrient trading and natural flood management.

The alternative is that green markets become like the Wild West, where farmers don't always draw first.

Farming is the only profession where everything, all the responsibility for getting the multiple technical, competing demands right, falls on the individual farmer's shoulders alone.

There is no expectation, and critically there are no legal duties, on the agriculture industry to support farmers to make the best choices for themselves or the environment.

And there is nothing, or very little, in the supply chain to require standards or proof for farmers' impact on the natural world.

We think the wider agri-food supply chain has a role to assist and incentivise farmers for making environmental progress.

Producer groups supplying to some retailers have made great strides in areas like animal welfare, but there is significant potential to do more for the natural world.

The Green Finance Institute is also exploring the need for upfront financing and investment to support farmers switching to more regenerative methods.

And the Environment Agency is working to help the private sector understand, invest in, and scale up activities that simultaneously deliver environmental improvements and generate an income.

Get it right and we can unlock investment into resilient food production and ensure that farmers are not ripped off by cowboys in city suits and welly boots.

One project we are supporting with the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Defra and Triodos Bank UK, is restoring peatlands in the Pennines.

These are some of the most degraded in Europe.

The Moors for the Future Partnership is working to restore and conserve peatland in the area, and to attract investment that delivers sustainable financial returns.

Restoring peatland creates benefits for private investors.

It stores carbon and it filters water, meaning water companies use less chemical treatment.

Peaty soils also have a huge role in reducing flood risk, and heavy rainfall and thunderstorms cause soil erosion which make flood risks worse.

Some of England's most productive and high value agricultural land is in the floodplain or in low-lying areas, many are below sea level.

In 2020, we published the National Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management

Strategy to 2100, which we worked on with the NFU.

One measure in the strategy concerns the Fens.

It says we will work with farmers, land managers, water companies and internal drainage boards in the Fens to better assess risks and discover what climate adaptation means in low-lying catchments where premium food production is dependent on flood risk management and land drainage.

We also plan to engage major supermarkets and the food and drinks sector in developing strategic options for sustainable food production in the Fens.

This approach will balance decisions which need to be taken now and those that need to be taken in the future.

Similarly, with the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission in Devon, the Environment Agency is supporting the trial of a new approach to long-term land use decisions.

This work has been part funded from a specific pot of money for innovative flood resilience.

We are seeking out new ways to deliver a more strategic approach to land use decision-making at local authority, catchment and landscape levels.

It will support action on net zero, nature recovery, ecosystems services, and also food production, housing and economic development.

Increasing public interest in the use of rivers for recreational activities, like kayaking or wild swimming, is bringing more scrutiny to the connections between water quality, the ecological health of rivers and human health.

The public demand tough action and we are delivering.

In the current financial year up to the end of January, the courts fined water companies £100,123,000 for pollution incidents following our prosecutions.

In November, the Environment Agency and Ofwat announced a criminal investigation into more than 2,200 sewage treatment works spanning all water and sewerage companies in England.

And I have called for the directors of companies guilty of repeated, deliberate or reckless breaches of environmental law to be given custodial sentences.

There has been some fantastic campaigning and awareness raising about the impact of water company pollution, but attention is shifting to agriculture.

Agricultural diffuse pollution is one of the biggest contributors to poor water quality in England.

It is the primary cause for 40 percent of water bodies failing to achieve

good ecological status.

We need a long term view on the best use of organic manures.

Organic manures can benefit soil health, sequester carbon and reduce the need for inorganic fertiliser.

However, their excess use impacts rivers.

As new laws are created by government, I want to deliver consistency and give you certainty about how we will enforce them.

By focusing on the 'what' – the standards we want to achieve – rather than a prescriptive 'how', we want to create space for you to innovate.

But, we must also be a robust regulator.

When some farmers undermine environmental law it delivers a triple threat.

1. It damages the natural resources you need to grow food
2. It undercuts your economic model
3. And it diminishes British farming in the eyes of the public.

That is why, for those who persistently break the rules, it is important we take action.

And we do.

But for those of you who want to do the right thing, the Environment Agency is on your side.

If you need expertise or if you need pointing in the direction of good practice, we will help alleviate that extra demand on your time.

The Environment Agency has worked hard to support the provision of money for slurry storage.

We all know many current slurry stores are not fit for purpose and farmers risk prosecution.

We hope this is a major opportunity for farmers to transform their storage and do the right thing for water quality, and avoid us having to prosecute, something we really don't want to have to do.

The farming rules for water came into force in 2017/18.

The Government created these regulations and the Environment Agency must implement them.

It was a significant change to business as usual, so we took an advice-led approach working with hundreds of farmers across the country to help with the new circumstances.

Last autumn, the Environment Agency introduced further flexibility by

introducing a regulatory position statement that allowed over 4,000 farmers to spread organic material on the land last autumn, who otherwise would not have the legal right to do so.

The Environment Agency cannot offer such flexibility in perpetuity, so I am pleased that the Secretary of State has asked Minister Prentis to create statutory guidance to remove any ambiguity about what is required this spring.

Alongside that, we must improve our communications, being clear and consistent about what compliance means and when it must be achieved.

We will work with the NFU, other farming bodies, Water UK and government to deliver clarity around the risk based approach we will apply to autumn spreading this year.

We also believe there are opportunities to streamline regulations governing farming and nutrient management and storage, which could make it easier for you to understand your obligations, and for us as a regulator.

Water resources are an issue.

We know that if the country continues to operate as usual:

- by 2050, we will need around 3,435 million extra litres of water per day
- and some rivers could have between 50 and 80 per cent less water during the summer

Although irrigation demands overall have gone down since the 1990s, spray irrigation demand is likely to increase in the longer term, with the biggest increases in eastern England.

However, uncertainty exists related to food policies, diet trends, the proportion of food that gets wasted, and how efficiently water for irrigation will be used.

I want the Environment Agency's regulation to deliver consistency so that farmers, water companies and other businesses, can see a reasonable and fair approach to water use.

Recently, emerging regional water resources plans have been launched for consultation that will start to show how the nation will manage water resources in the future.

Please take part in the consultation, we want to hear from you.

We see these plans not as the end of the story, but the beginning of how we act to ensure resilient and secure water supplies.

In the two years since I last spoke at the NFU conference, the pandemic highlighted the importance of British food production and international trade to keeping everyone fed with a balanced diet.

By 2030, the population of the world will be over 8.5 billion people.

There will be a likely 50 percent increase in global food demand between 2010 and 2050.

With strategy and a clear vision, that should be an opportunity for farming.

Get it right and it should leave a legacy of productive agriculture, long-term food security, increased biodiversity, viable infrastructure and thriving places.

The NFU's Blueprint for British Farming says: "We have a once in-a-generation opportunity to make a success of the UK's new domestic agricultural policy and ensure that everyone recognises the importance and value of British food, and the huge benefits farming contributes to the whole country – its economy and its treasured landscapes – through our world-leading environmental and animal welfare standards."

We agree, but to deliver that we must also overcome climate impacts and natural decline.

The Environment Agency and the farming sector have shared goals.

We must work, learn and innovate together to achieve them.

Thank you.