

Briefing

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WHAT FARMERS SAID ABOUT CLIMATE POLICY

- They've lost trust in government around climate and the emissions data informing policy
- They say carbon-focused policy could be treating farming unfairly
- They look at emissions not in isolation but beside other priorities
- They see opportunities in reducing emissions but also major risks

WHERE FARMERS THINK POLICY CAN HELP

- Making measurement and modelling of emissions simpler and more robust
- Keeping UK farming competitive internationally as it decarbonises
- Encouraging supply chains to incentivise low carbon farming
- Building on existing schemes
- Supporting on-farm renewables
- Funding peer-to-peer learning

EFFECTIVE FARMING AND CLIMATE POLICY SHOULD:

1. Look beyond emissions and take a whole systems approach
2. Mitigate extra cost and risk falling on farmers
3. Talk up the positive benefits of low emission, high resilience farming
4. Consider the wider food economy
5. Tailor policies and schemes to regions and landscapes
6. Launch proper, open debate on contentious areas

Farming talks climate

HOW FARMERS THINK ABOUT REDUCING AGRICULTURE'S CLIMATE IMPACT AND ADAPTING TO NEW EXTREMES

Farming must speed up cutting greenhouse gas emissions, while grappling with the changing climate. The intense heat and drought of mid-2026 are just the latest extreme weather that is having severe repercussions on the country's food security. Fractious discussion of agriculture and climate policy has made policymaking tentative and slowed the uptake of low emission practices.

The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) was commissioned by Defra to run a series of conversations with farmers across England to inform the forthcoming Food and Farming Decarbonisation Plan. In June and July 2026, FFCC convened 10 two-hour sessions, speaking to 92 farmers in total, in a mixture of in-person and online meetings. These meetings were brought together by selected partner organisations and businesses to represent a range of farm types and regions, spanning the country from Northumberland to Cornwall. They explored the core question:

How can government and industry help farms reduce their climate impact, while balancing other priorities such as profitability, resilience, food production and nature?

The Climate Change Committee (CCC) has outlined how agriculture must accelerate emissions reductions to meet the UK's net zero goals. Though the sector's emissions have reduced 12% since 1990, this is due to falling livestock numbers and using less fertiliser, rather than policy. Compared to other parts of the economy, farming is hard to decarbonise. Most of its emissions come from methane and nitrous oxide, not burning fossil fuels. Farms are all different and the majority are small, family-run businesses, making little profit and carrying most of the risk in a food chain dominated by billion-pound commodity traders, processors, manufacturers and supermarkets. Agriculture policy has been in flux since Brexit. Some action on climate change, such as lowering cattle and sheep numbers further and trialling methane suppressants, has been challenged by farming organisations.

To account for this complexity and controversy, FFCC's conversations followed the principles of 'deliberative dialogue'. Farmers reflected on what was working in their businesses around emissions, where policy could help, and what would make policy and industry action effective.

HOW FARMERS THINK ABOUT CLIMATE POLICY

They've lost trust in politicians and policymakers. This goes beyond familiar comments about the turnover of ministers and poor understanding of agriculture. Farmers said that the Climate Change and Environment Acts provide a legal basis that leaves food and farming as lower priorities in policymaking. Short-term policy and funding commitments are also a risk for climate action. Changing practices or systems is risky if schemes and grants don't stay available. The three-year length of Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) agreements was brought up repeatedly, with farmers saying it was too short to bed in and learn from new practices.

"I am far more frightened of what the government will do to me because of what they view as a changing climate than what the climate itself will do to me."

Arable farmer, Lincolnshire

They lack confidence in the data. In every conversation, farmers expressed frustration with their experience of using on-farm carbon calculators. They said that these tools did not reflect the range of farming practices, farm types, soils and landscapes, and mistakes could have significant consequences. They also worried that questionable data, both for individual farms and sector-wide modelling, could lead to misguided policymaking. Farmers were keen to talk about the warming impact of methane emitted from the digestion of cattle and sheep. They described how a lack of clarity from government in this area – combined with the issues about trust and data – left them feeling maligned and unable

"There are areas of high uncertainty, and the calculators are not that robust. Small changes [to farming practices], which can be made inadvertently or deliberately, depending on how you choose to operate, can make very big differences."

Livestock farmer, Yorkshire

to make further progress. Those raising this were not dismissing methane as a problem, but wanted a guide from politicians and policymakers about how to understand emissions involved in natural cycles. They suggested greater use of split gas accounting, publishing data with both GWP100 and GWP* calculations, and guidance on which to use in specific situations.

They say climate policy treats farming unfairly. Farmers think agriculture is being targeted in policy discussions compared to other sectors. They also described the framing of net zero or

decarbonisation as dispiriting and unrealistic for a sector that relies on natural processes and cycles, and whose land assets will also have to offset emissions for the wider economy. They talked about how policy signals suggested that emissions could be brought down simply by stopping certain farming activities. These fears were acute among cattle and sheep farmers, who brought up the example of the drop in livestock numbers over several decades and proposed further reductions in the CCC's Balanced Pathway and similar net zero plans. They said this was negative and wrongheaded when there was solid demand for UK red meat and dairy.

They don't look at emissions in isolation. As soon as the conversations started, farmers questioned the premise of the discussion. On its own, cutting emissions was not a business priority, especially in certain sectors. Most farmers saw reducing their climate impact as a co-benefit of other changes for productivity, efficiency and profitability. Those most mentioned were pushing for higher yields and faster livestock finishing, cutting or changing the use of bought-in inputs such as fertiliser, improved efficiency in the use of resources, and environmental enhancement rewarded through public payments or private finance. Livestock farmers running lower-input systems were vocal about non-carbon benefits, such as improved soil health and water-holding capacity of land, increased biodiversity,

"You know, we'll do what we can. A – because it's good for the environment. Also, B – it's got to be right for the bottom line."

Mixed farmer, West Sussex

and insulation from volatile purchased input costs. They were concerned that it was hard to account for these benefits if the focus of policy was carbon.

“It’s just nuts to look at things in isolation. It’s not how the world works. Everything you do has an impact on something else.”

Livestock farmer, Pasture for Life conversation

Farmers said government should be making connections between emissions reduction and other policy areas. They noted that government or industry initiatives ostensibly aimed at nature or animal welfare – such as nature-friendly SFI options or animal health and productivity grants – usually had a climate benefit.

Climate adaptation came up most. Farmers said that extreme weather was hampering positive changes. For example, livestock farmers mentioned having to bring animals inside to shelter during the warmest parts of the day and provide extra access to water, limiting their ability to pursue nature-friendly and regenerative approaches, such as mob grazing. Arable farmers explained how, when water was short, the need to use irrigation and the resulting lower yields led to higher emissions per tonne of crop. Farmers said that the construction of on-farm reservoirs, rainwater harvesting and new water lines for livestock troughs should be integral to decarbonisation.

Farmers also identified places where climate-related policy seemed to be pulling in different directions, or where beneficial practices were falling through gaps. A group of farmers interested in combining tree planting with food production said that, while the Land Use Framework had identified agroforestry for areas of land, this had not translated to funded schemes.

They see opportunities in reducing emissions but worry about the risks. Many businesses are baselining and tracking emissions to get ahead of government and industry demands. Farmers were interested in selling carbon credits and described ‘dipping their toe’ into this market, but they also said the market felt immature, which made them hesitant. Farmers in some sectors – particularly dairy, arable and beef – said they had received benefits from their supply chain customers for recording or reducing emissions. These benefits included moderate premiums on the sale of their milk, grain and meat and non-financial benefits, such as better contract terms, involvement in knowledge exchange groups or data-sharing and benchmarking. Accessibility is patchy in terms of geography and sector. Such schemes are mostly focused on nature, with emissions as a secondary concern.

“Because most emissions are on farm, we’re going to get the big stick. We’re at the bottom. We’re the easy people to hit.”

Dairy farmer, Yeo Valley conversation

WHERE FARMERS SAY POLICY CAN HELP

Measurement and modelling of emissions. Farmers are keen for work to be done around standardising and simplifying on-farm measurement. Some suggested there should be a single, simplified system, based on a smaller number of measures and metrics for performance. They said this could focus on practical changes that show improvement, rather than worrying about an overall footprint.

Other farmers did not think that a more simplified system was possible, pointing to the diversity of sectors like horticulture and the uniqueness of every farm and the range of soils and landscapes that climate models and calculators had to comprehend. Farmers also had concerns about the ability of government to develop a centralised model, because the science was changing and needed to be kept up to date. Minimum standards and guidance, they

“We’re still relatively small. This extra burden of paperwork is just unsustainable for some growers of my size.”

Mixed farmer, Herefordshire

said, could be a better approach. Farmers wanted to talk about reducing the administrative burden of carbon audits, which fell particularly hard on smaller businesses with few employees. Farmers raising this problem suggested that government could help to bring different audits together and encourage the development of accessible systems. Government and industry leadership could also be much clearer over what should be included in different measurements, such as sequestration in soils, and what should be prioritised at a national level.

Keeping UK farming competitive. Measures to ensure imported food met the climate and nature standards expected of British farmers were raised early in every conversation. Farmers said they were happy to follow economic incentives to reduce their climate impact, but worried about weakening British farming's position in the international marketplace by adding extra cost and drawing in imports. Farmers also brought up the issue of carbon leakage and the UK off-shoring its carbon footprint while consumer demand for higher emission products remained strong. Farmers raised the potential for measures like a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism being extended to a wider range of products. But they were unsure whether government could design and enforce a functioning and fair mechanism.

"It's the footprint of UK food, not UK farming, that really matters."

Norfolk farmer, CLA conversation

Encouraging supply chains to incentivise decarbonisation. Farmers liked the principle of insetting environmental impacts within supply chains, particularly because it allowed them to make the most of the sequestration potential of their land as part of the food system, when there is pressure from other industries to use that same land for their offsets. This approach also gives farmers greater choice. In contrast to regulations or mandates, farms could decide the best course of action as a business to become involved in schemes and seek a premium. But they had concerns about how these schemes run in practice. Livestock and arable farmers suggested that such initiatives were more difficult to develop in their sectors, where the market was more fragmented than in the likes of dairy or horticulture. Others pointed to the problem of auditing, especially when different processors and retailers operated slightly different schemes. Farmers were concerned that relying too much on the supply chain could further consolidate the position of large retailers and processors, to the detriment of farmers. More extensive, low-input and organic cattle and sheep farmers also worried that this would emphasize emissions intensity, favouring practices such as the faster-finishing of animals as well as more intensive pig and poultry systems.

There was also strong appetite to **build on existing schemes**, by strengthening the climate connection in programmes like the SFI and Landscape Recovery, to **encourage investment in on-farm renewables** through grants and overcoming technical barriers, and to **fund farmer-led groups to run peer-to-peer learning** around low emission farming and support the dissemination of research.

"Don't stand an industry leader up. Don't stand the NFU up. Don't stand a scientist up. Stand a farmer up. Or better still, take the farmers to his farm and show them."

Livestock farmer, Yorkshire

Farmers were sceptical about policies to influence demand for high emission foods, such as labelling and targeted public procurement. They said that shoppers already faced lots of information about health, production methods and animal welfare, and that emissions were too complex to convey. Farmers were also opposed to tougher measures, such as stricter environmental permitting or carbon-based taxes on farming practices, pointing to the experience of carbon taxation in Denmark and nitrogen reduction measures in the Netherlands.

RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT FARMERS PROPOSE

These recommendations are distilled from the strongest themes across all 10 conversations, and apply across a range of policy options. Farmers said an effective Food and Farming Decarbonisation Plan should:

1. Look beyond emissions and take a whole systems approach

Reducing farming's climate impact should not be isolated from other priorities. A narrow emphasis on carbon risks perverse consequences, particularly for nature, food production, animal welfare and the viability of smaller farming businesses. Policies and industry initiatives should also be designed with consideration of these wider impacts and the practicalities of farm business management. They should encourage on-farm measures that have clear and explicitly stated co-benefits.

"Whilst it might not be we get out of bed in the morning and think, 'How do we reduce our emissions today?', I think there's a recognition that the environmental impact, the efficiency and profitability, that they're all totally entwined."

Livestock farmer, ABP conversation

2. Mitigate extra cost and risk falling on farmers

Schemes and incentives to reduce emissions should be simple and accessible. To avoid further audit burden, carbon footprinting should be streamlined and harmonised with other reporting. Smaller farming businesses should not be penalised in applying for grants or accessing schemes, or through policies that push supply chains to track and reduce their climate impact. Policy around emissions should not further weaken the position of farmers as larger businesses push cost and risk upstream.

"The big guys can afford to pay people to do these audits, but the little, it just destroys them."

Dairy farmer, Yeo Valley conversation

3. Talk up the positive benefits of low emission, high resilience farming

Negative language around decarbonisation, such as stopping certain practices altogether and cutting animal numbers, is putting off farmers from exploring different approaches. Farmers see real business opportunities in a low emission future, especially around resilience, and these benefits should be emphasized in communications and policy.

"As farmers, we don't like to be told we're doing it wrong. So what's going to drive them to get there? They need to be more profitable. They need to be more resilient. They need to earn more money from their farm. That's how you're going to learn."

Mixed farmer, Soil Association Exchange conversation

4. Consider the wider food economy

Policy should not reduce farming's climate impact by simply reducing domestic production, allowing carbon leakage and offshoring other environmental and animal welfare impacts. Farmers want government to

promote insetting within food supply chains because it makes sense and feels fair, and are keen to focus on reducing emissions intensity. Government should work with industry to make sure decarbonising the food system maintains the country's food security, while achieving its ambitions around future land use and nature restoration.

"Every grower will talk about a level playing field. It's the first thing on their lips. So we've got to be careful. What are the standards on what's coming into the country?"

Arable farmer, Lincolnshire conversation

5. Tailor policies and schemes to regions and landscapes

Low emission farming is not one-size-fits-all. Different techniques and approaches are more or less appropriate in different regions and landscapes and on different soils. Policy should consider the regional impact of farming and climate policy, integrate closely with the Land Use Framework and other spatial strategies, and offer flexibility so that farmers can adopt practices and systems that suit their land. Policies should also consider the impact on the broader rural economy and the food grown and consumed in a region for other beneficial reasons.

"This is what good climate farming looks like here, and it's different over there."

Arable farmer, North East Cotswolds Farmer Cluster conversation

6. Launch proper, open debate on contentious areas

Farmers are not averse to a constructive discussion about the future role of livestock and methane's warming impact. But they are wary about farming being targeted when government must stick to climate and environmental laws, and they lack trust in the information being used to make decisions. Politicians and policymakers should be clear about what is prioritised at a national level, where there is uncertainty, and how different measures should be used. Wider consultation on Defra's developing decarbonisation strategy should address these difficult issues directly. That consultation should also contain opportunities for calm, considered conversation with groups of individual farmers, where there is time to develop and propose solutions rooted in practical knowledge.

"If the government is going to be carbon zero, and they're going to tax their citizens to meet that target, then we will have to start eating less [meat]. If the answer is less, we can give them less. I've no qualms with that. The issue is the price we're being paid."

Dairy farmer, Cumbria conversation

The 10 conversations were convened by (in conversation order): ABP, Northumberland County Council, North East Cotswolds Farmer Cluster, Yeo Valley, Paragon Veterinary Group, Soil Association Exchange, Pasture for Life, Sustainable Food Cornwall, Greater Lincolnshire Forum for Agriculture and Horticulture, CLA. The briefing distributed to participants was produced by Elta Smith at Root and Reason and Holly Shearman at RASE/Innovation for Agriculture.

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