

Welsh Agriculture White Paper

Farmers – you need to lead the way.

By Dr Glenda Thomas, Director of FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group) Cymru.



THERE is a particularly important consultation out by the Welsh Government at the moment. The document is titled Agriculture White Paper and follows two previous consultations "Brexit and our Land" and "Sustainable Farming and our Land."

The Government is insisting on a complete change in the way that they support farming. It is particularly important that we all take note and respond to this consultation paper, which describes the proposed changes, as they affect us all.

It is the Government's intention to remove the Single Farm Payment as well as the agri-environment scheme, Glastir. It will be replaced by just one scheme based on paying for "public goods." These goods include services provided by farmers but there is usually no payment available for these.

They are things we all take for granted including conserving nature and wildlife, locking carbon into the soil, ensuring high water quality, looking after important features of our landscape including historic sites, forests and trees, stone walls, banks and hedgerows and so on.

We agree that the idea of recognising the importance of the public goods and paying for them is a very good one but our concerns are about the willingness and the Government's desire to fund these in order to make the new scheme adequate and fair.

You can see the result of all the environmental management that farms undertake through the landscape. The heather mountains continue as they are but through sensitive management that includes grazing which is on a variable scale and includes rotational targeted burn or cutting.

The habitat is extremely important in managing the herding on part of our mountains and just how important are the farmers and shepherds who know the landscape and have good animal rearing skills?

Perhaps often, people think of the sheep in terms of meat and wool production (although the product is not respected these days as it should be), they are not seen as an animal that plays such

an important part in controlling our habitats by grazing the vegetation. Similarly cattle are particularly important in managing habitats with grazing and trampling which keep plants such as rushes and grass down which ensures that other more fragile flowers continue to thrive.

So to keep all the habitats under control, we need the farm animals and also the managers of our environment, namely the farmers. Without all these, we cannot keep the countryside and our landscapes in a way which our residents and visitors find attractive.

In the last year or two we have heard a great deal from the Government and other bodies, about working in partnership with farmers and the agriculture industry as a whole.

Disappointing and surprising, therefore, that this White Paper begins with pages talking about the usual things.

It then goes on to talk about assessing farm businesses and offering advice to farmers on this and that. It would be much better to ask farmers themselves to take responsibility to assess their businesses and write the farm plan for the provision of the public goods.

Such a scheme is much more likely to be fit for purpose, practical and successful in achieving the objectives. Naturally, many farmers will look for guidance in creating the scheme and if they are to choose which individual or organisation they turn to; not the Government's choice.

Clearly, there will be an important role for Government staff in this scenario by ensuring the quality of farm plans. We therefore call on farmers to take the lead, the responsibility of creating the Farm Plans and ensuring that they are in charge.

It is therefore very important to respond to this consultation - also here under Knowledge Transfer section of the website - by the 25th March, 2021.