

NATURAL RESOURCES AND LAND USE

THE WAY AHEAD

Concerns about the varied effectiveness of a range of policy instruments in the field of land management built to a significant level as the first impressions of the latest CAP reform were registered. In the same period DEFRA has embarked on the task of creating a Vision for Natural Resources in order to bring improved policy cohesion and, thereby, management results.

How well do these two sets of concerns serve the needs of conservation, enhancement and management of our natural resources?

Responsible Use of Resources in Agriculture and on the Land

RURAL Briefing Number 17

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Briefings concentrate on the Policy Seminars which are the main business of the Society. The seminars provide opportunity for in depth discussion of important issues relating to agriculture and land use, as well as the wider food, farming and countryside policy.

Briefings provide RURAL supporters and others with coverage of the policy issues examined and debated under the Society's arrangements, and which help to inform the policy development process and those close to and affected by it.

Briefing No 17 reports a debate on the way ahead for Natural Resources policy. Concerns expressed to the Society coincided with Government's attempts to write a suitable vision for the topic. The hope is that the vision will set the tone for policy to better enable the conservation, enhancement and management of natural resources.

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**RURAL SEMINAR
NATURAL RESOURCES AND LAND USE - THE WAY AHEAD**

Background.

For some time RURAL has been receiving a variety of comment expressing concern that the current array of policies related to land management and natural resources is not succeeding in attaining conservation objectives and that conflicting priorities impede efficient management. Concerns expressed include the conviction that schemes are inadequately resourced and unlikely to realise their potential in the long term; there is insufficient flexibility and integration with other social, environmental and economic objectives, too much depends upon isolated pockets of individual expertise and goodwill at ground level, too little regard is being paid to the decline in management and skills in the countryside, the underpinning science is deficient, and the effects of revisions to CAP are not being properly anticipated.

For its part DEFRA, as part of its strategic work on Sustainable Development and sustainable land use, has been working to develop a new vision for Natural Resource Protection. Latterly this has been improved upon and is now described as “for the conservation, enhancement and management of the natural environment”. This vision would set the context for a range of policies. It is, for example, intended to provide guidance to other Government Departments and the newly anticipated body Natural England. Thus, the Vision statement should provide an important piece of policy architecture for the environmental outcomes now expected of farmers and land managers. As such, it ought to address many of the above concerns. This draft vision has already been the subject of external workshops with interested parties, and has been out to consultation on-line. The Department aims to publish it at the end of the year.

The current DRAFT Vision Statement is at Annex A to this Briefing. The statement is two parts, commencing with a statement of why the Natural Environment is valued, and concluding with the Draft Vision. The Departmental on-line consultation closed as this Briefing went to press, however the DEFRA web site will continue to provide up-date material.

This seminar provided an opportunity to clarify some philosophical issues such as the distinction between natural resources and resources generally, and to ask the key questions about the ‘fit’ of the vision with the complex array of existing policy tools affecting farming and land management.

In the immediate future, management of land in the UK faces a quite new set of economic and political pressures. These stem in part from the reform of the CAP and pressures to open EU markets to imports but they also reflect a different set of public goals for the sector, including emphasis on the environmental impact of farming activity, on the safety of food and of the importance of animal welfare. It is not just that past schemes may have failed adequately to deal with past problems; they do not even address the problems we are about to face. Changed land use has become inescapable. A clear and shared vision of what is required therefore seems essential. This seminar provided an opportunity to scrutinise DEFRA’s vision at a point close to its finalisation, and to debate its ‘fit’ with what is needed on the ground.

As with any vision document, cautions apply. Any vision statement is just that: it cannot cater for widely varied sets of circumstances and, also, be specific. Weakness lies in the need to be ‘all things to all people’. It cannot provide solutions: it should, however, provide direction. Around this it must construct broad principles to guide both public and private decision takers. Detailed policy reaction and operational guidance will have to be worked out through mechanisms and with the cooperation of agents.

Policy custodians have sought to move from a position in which the term Natural Resource Protection has lacked clarity, to one in which, among others, the roles and expectations of and for farmers and land managers in conservation, enhancement and management of natural resources are recognised and more satisfactorily prioritised within what was described as a “rash of policy instruments”.

Inevitably perhaps, discussion at this seminar commenced with its own rash of concerns. These reflected the enthusiasm of practitioners from across the spectrum of farming, land management and the natural environment for more efficient policy instruments and the desire to do better in the key fields of conservation, enhancement and management.

Defining the target

Natural resources are essential to life. Yet, because they have been so abundant as to be taken for granted, their essential nature is seldom discussed. However, as economic growth and living standards arise there is growing awareness that many are finite and some in danger of becoming scarce. There is no existing policy rationale based on availability or scarcity. For example, development in the dry South East continues apparently without regard for the consequences for water supply. Landscape is similarly challenged. We lack a metric that can evaluate what is most important in the many different dimensions within which competing interests for land use have to come to terms with environmental limits, physical, social, economic and political. Policy in practice has to reconcile diverse demands within what is practicable, taking account not only of the current generation but also of responsibilities to people yet to be born.

The public feeling about green spaces is well documented. Most treasured landscapes are managed by their occupiers. Their performance is assessed in terms of indicators that capture only part of the total value of their contribution to society. For example many policies are based on a general assumption that biodiversity is “good”. Problems occur however where policy is discontinuous and measures appropriate to one issue are inapplicable or in conflict with another. The result can be policies that pull in differing directions. For example concerns about climate change have led to a number of government responses that do not appear to be sufficiently critically scrutinised in terms of their environmental, social and economic characteristics to determine their relative cost effectiveness.

“Sustainable” is now built into the current policy process including this vision. It is automatically assumed to be “good”. This ‘goodness assumption’ tends to pre-empt the debate about the real choices relating to “resources”. Thus, for some, a ‘natural resource’ may be placed in special position of ‘goodness’ just because it is there, it has intrinsic worth, - and indeed may have other resources human, economic, social or political, lavished upon it. For others the value of resources might classify according to usefulness to society. A resource is defined as something that has value because of its use, in production, consumption or enjoyment. This raises questions about “useful/valuable to whom and how valuable compared with other resources and outputs?” For many people a useful vision must incorporate a balance of utilitarian and non-utilitarian values for all resources.

The wider environmental debate is heavily populated with special interest groups and ‘agendas’ and, frequently, it is apparent that these interests are not in balance. Further, it is the case that the debate of these issues is often at a level that has little regard for what is actually practicable; i.e. truly amenable to action on the ground by people locally and individually responsible. In this situation there emerges a tendency for the policy process to become an ‘end’ in itself - rather than a means to ends or objectives.

The land and its associated ‘services,’ i.e. what it does for society at large, is perhaps unique in the nation’s economic portfolio. Whereas, for example, much of the UK’s manufacturing base has been ‘exported’ to the developing world, this is not the case for the land or for most of the services it delivers. The tradable outputs of the land can be imported and in future a larger share of our food requirements seems likely to be sourced from outside the UK. However, many services will be demanded that cannot be produced abroad. These include food that meets the needs of buyers who prefer to know their food is of local origin; non-food outputs such as, landscape, space for development and recreation. The services derived from land include, too, less obviously visible activities such as the absorption of waste, storage of water, fixing of carbon, biodiversity and maintenance of habitat. Sustainable land use strategy therefore needs to be underpinned by recognition of the whole bundle of services that land provides. That should be part of the vision.

Making the policy operational

Many of these outputs can still come, as has historically been the case, as a by-product of land-based businesses responding to pressures in their markets. A noteworthy current change has been a marked fall in the use of pesticides and herbicides because, in part, of higher prices. Other effects stem from the power of retailers to influence the commodity and food products market. The development of novel activities on the farm, such as craft workshops and food boxes, represent a spontaneous response to opportunities in the market place. The rate of change at present is thought to be accelerating and positive for the natural environment

The care and management of these land services links directly to the well being of the assets themselves. There is an inescapable economic component; for example water can be ‘trapped’ and stored, and biodiversity can be enhanced but this requires investment and constrains the use of resources for other purposes. Given the huge array of natural resources, much depends on who owns what and how appropriate economic signals can be given to reflect the balance of market demand and public good. Soil erosion provides a case in point. Much of the ‘problem’ is not associated with loss of soil from upstream but the unwanted presence of relatively small amounts of minute particles downstream. This may create local stream habitat problems and impose a cost on water companies for cleaning. The economic consequences thus become remote from the asset and are ‘owned’ or ‘suffered’ by someone else.

Landscape poses its own problems of definition and description. What exactly is meant by landscape as a resource? It is not just soil, water, air and topography, and the attendant plant and animal population, whether managed or not. One view is that all the UK’s landscapes are valued and are ‘managed’ rather than ‘natural’. It is misleading to describe them other wise. Another approach suggests that in many areas it is misleading to talk of ‘landscape’, when the scale is that of the ‘farmscape’.

Society’s valuation of landscape almost certainly includes a complex mix of the man-made and naturally occurring, access and

remoteness, recreation and solitude, paradoxes that together make up the value of the asset and demand flexibility of approach. The accommodation of each of these elements in policy instruments is not simple. Probably the best approach is to envisage the total “function” and “product” of land. Then within a changing economic and political protect the capacity of land to deliver of the mixture of functions, and products. Another way is to look for the services the land-based environment provides.

At this stage, although food is mentioned, the draft vision is thought unsatisfactory for its lack of explicit recognition of the role and potential of farming. In the statements of delivery the current draft seeks “to deliver a fishing sector that is sustainable and profitable and supports strong local communities, and is managed effectively as an integral part of coherent policies for the marine environment.” There is, to date, no parallel statement for the land-based sector and the land environment. Farming processes provide the income flows that enable most land and many human resources to continue in their existing uses. Their impact affects not only the use of farmland but also the viability of farming communities and non-food as well as food commodity production. This has been the foundation upon which farming has provided positive environmental benefits. It underpins the potential of land to support other forms of development and afford the social infrastructure needed by modern communities. The seminar was not convinced that the statement that the natural environment is valued because all values or ecosystem services are underpinned by biodiversity. Biodiversity, it was held, is not an accident; it too is largely a function of management.

Experience tells us that when policy instruments are used to tamper with elements of the mix in isolation, further problems often ensue (e.g. the over and under-grazing issues on uplands). Similarly, blanket provision of publicly funded facilities such as footpath signing and infrastructure such as styles and gates across all footpaths “because they are there” and without regard for utility has led to many examples of waste of the public money in the name of supporting a facility. Society, especially at the local level, tends to have an instinctive grasp of what is appropriate.

Dealing with natural resources in isolation brings problems elsewhere, notably in the handling of so-called “wastes”. Many wastes are naturally derived - but not handled as such by policy instruments. For example, much wood finds its way into land-fill because it is not regarded as fuel and waste plasterboard, which, when properly recovered, could beneficially be land spread because of its useful lime content, cannot be so disposed of at present. Waste generally is not systematically analysed in NPK terms. Participants provided numerous examples of frustration of endeavour caused by “policy activity in silos”. Not only does this cause loss of focus, but it impedes synergy where it is badly needed, sends mixed and wrong messages to farmers and land managers, and adds costs.

A typical consequence is the loss of recognition of the complementarity of food production and biodiversity. Where topics cross Departmental boundaries the problem is even worse - at present most notably on energy and climate change subjects. One forecast envisages 20% of land producing energy crops within 10 years. What, it was asked, might be the biodiversity consequences of such a shift in cropping - and where did this sort of dynamism fit into the vision?

Coping with local diversity.

Speakers questioned the target audience for the vision. Is it aimed at practitioners, or at the highest level of policymakers? Is it intended merely to be the over-arching guide - from which a cascade effect can be expected? There is a need to clarify who the intended reactors are. From this stems the issue of motivation, why do societies do and value certain things? Economic drivers are usually present, but there are other factors; wilderness, for example, may be marketable. Obvious regional differences, Wales, Shetland, Northern and Southern England all have different ‘resources’ and different values - but all have genetic resources and all have land based and farming communities which add to the natural resource capital. The vision, it was argued, needs to support the communities and economic drivers on which this land fabric depends.

It was also noted that much is already changing. Vision needs to accommodate this and be able to accommodate the dynamics of change. One characteristic of farming and landscape makes the point: the largest tracts of UK’s most treasured landscapes are generally furthest from the commodity food producers, and this trend is being driven faster by world economics. Much of what we have in landscape terms is exactly what society says it wants but it is still managed terrain and will cease to be what it is if management fails. So are there choices to be made in this vision? What should be changed? What should be defended? -What should be the reaction to changes in train?

It was argued that an important purpose of Vision statements and similar policy devices is to facilitate the making of informed choices. In a society with increased and rising expectations in respect of health, wealth and environment it becomes essential to understand the limits of what is possible. Decisions need to be made in the light of signals that reflect what is possible not only in terms of environmental tolerance and capacity to deliver preferred lifestyles, but also in the context of society’s willingness to pay and its ability to reconcile the inevitable conflicts which arise in the natural environment

The tourism ‘honeypot’ dilemma is already familiar. There are others in prospect. CAP reform, partly because of SFP differentials, may become a cause of major de-stocking of the uplands. Speculation suggests that substantial lowland acreages may leave arable production. Reductions of sugar beet production that provides feed for over-wintering geese in Eastern England may threaten an important bird population. Landowners who cannot secure economic rents are putting land into forestry; and sales of land are reflecting some transition from production to private amenity, reflecting a different set of values.

Delivering the vision

If the vision is to be delivered the need to concentrate on outcomes is a major requirement. Too often, especially with EU-based schemes, there is a huge and costly burden of compliance monitoring and audit trail activity. By contrast, outcome monitoring has involved only a fraction of the costs although it is the most important dimension. There is therefore a need for a vision and policy culture that engages the practitioners and is about outcomes - not the process.

The highly varied nature of the countryside presents a difficulty both for the vision and for the policies that will achieve it. On one hand holistic approaches are necessary, and this is reflected already in policies such as whole farm planning, integrated farm management and catchment management. Consistency of approach is necessary across wide areas of policy activity. On the other hand local flexibility is often essential for the achievement of objectives, yet the very policies which are intended to facilitate this can easily prevent it because of zealous prescription.

The seminar was told that the single most sought-after characteristic of policy for managing natural resources is local flexibility. Examples were given in areas such as grassland management, SSSIs, breeding wader sites and water catchment where prescription had been counter-productive. A workable vision needs to be able to accommodate site-specific choices for optimum results, and give land managers a sense of ownership of the design, outcomes and objectives.

The flow of information is critical to success. In order to foster land managers' interest data and information, especially research results, needs to be readily available. They are often difficult to access. The expectation is that the new Higher Level environment schemes will allow more dialogue. The resource protection objectives are concerned with integration of information, gaining knowledge and understanding the value of the asset. We do not, it is argued, yet have a good grasp of what constitutes landscape health. This is important as HM Treasury negotiates the level of spending needed to deliver what the taxpayer will regard as good value for public funds.

Land managers, it was claimed, have no objection to being 'policed' as they go about achieving the publicly supported objectives. However they do expect to participate in a dialogue on objectives and they do need to be empowered to make the best decisions, involving a better dialogue with officials during implementation. It was pointed out that, over time, continuous prescription and lack of discretion has led in effect to de-skilling of farmers and land managers in many of the areas that are assuming new importance. Field margin prescriptions provide an example. The trend needs to be reversed. The psychology of the situation was described as a necessary shift from the current culture based on "Tell me what you want me to do." to one of "Tell me what you want - and I will work out how to do it."

This was especially important in the context of the forthcoming Water Framework Directive where efforts need to be integrated across catchments. Dialogue is essential and the business skills of the farmers are likely to be the very skills which are demanded. Participants returned repeatedly to this theme of flexibility, co-operation, and the need to enable all farmers and land managers to make informed choices. Central to this is the maintenance and development of the skills base. One view of the current schemes is that the financial arithmetic that equates to ten minutes of advice per farm is clearly insufficient. There needs to be reassurance that, for the majority of land managers, advice will work. Experience from SFP introduction is that the financial incentive is working. Early results from initial efforts to control diffuse pollution area are encouraging.

However, there is still a difficulty. As is often the case in agriculture the top 10-20% who account for the majority of land do not present a problem; it is the remaining 80% of the land holders, usually the smaller and least well resourced enterprises, who make up the significant 'rump' of difficulty; often in important landscape areas. This trend may well be exacerbated as restructuring and CAP reform proceeds and more holdings resort to the use of contractors. Emphasis was placed on the need for one-to-one advice, the need to integrate Stewardship with other schemes and the value of the FWAG and LEAF approaches. ELS was singled out as a good and well-presented scheme, presently blocked by the well known mapping problem.

There is a further set of issues about the level and detail of enforcement. Farmers are already placed in situations where if 100% compliance with all aspects of regulation were to be enforced it would simply be impossible to comply because of conflicting regulatory demands - including those originating outside agriculture such as Transport and Planning. Given the potential for confusion between Entry Level and Higher Level Schemes and cross-compliance and differing conditions for margins, for hedgerows, woodland, roads, set aside, and watercourses, some voluntary and some not; it was argued that moves to greater simplicity and flexibility are essential. There are real problems in enforcement, indeed there many known examples of non-enforcement. Farmers need clear knowledge of what is outside the law and how they can manage to work within it. This is likely to be a substantive issue in the application of the Water Framework Directive.

Monitoring of outcomes is also necessary at the landscape level. This provides information for the general public and for those actually running schemes. In a catchment, for example very few people - farmers or managers - may be really aware of the evidence required to assess the overall impact of schemes. Arising from this, participants were very positive in their view of self-regulation and even farmer-on-farmer "inspections," after the Swiss model that relies on 100% inspection to qualify for financial support. This form of socially based 'policing' has been shown to be effective and could contribute in many ways - to integration, to social cohesion, to streamlining, flexibility, building of trust, and technology transfer.

Another model advocated was the 'key farmer network' in which individuals are encouraged to form networks to develop common interests; these could then expand pyramid style and work within a catchment. The key to success in such schemes is that the participants are made to feel valued, not least by Government. Currently this is not the case in farming, although surveys tell us that the public values farming.

A further way of making progress lies in alliances. These could be among agencies and among land managers either for liaison or for active collaboration. They may well lead to more active and formal partnerships to deal with specific local problems and to design solutions. Catchment management lends itself to and could benefit greatly from these sorts of approaches. Awareness of their potential needs to be raised. One suggestion was that they might be encouraged if Village Post Offices displayed catchment maps.

A current frustration for advisers is that frequently they cannot obtain access to the same documents as their clients, for example

in relation to the SFP. A related issue was the Seminar's concern with training issues. It was felt that the knowledge base needed to cope with the emerging situation of farming was much broader than had been the case for most farmers and their advisors in the past. There are key deficiencies of knowledge and lack of key people who "can elicit problems and design training solutions".

The role of regulation

As the vision is established, land management practices must take root and flourish under a lighter regulatory burden. A systems approach is needed, in which decision taking can be decentralised to a practical operational scale, where there exists the best understanding, for example, of environmental limits. Two requirements for the vision arise from this. How are policy and delivery to be most efficiently connected and who should make the choices?

The administrative background is one of extreme complexity with numerous issues competing for government attention and public resources. Government has produced a number of strategic statements containing objectives for environment. All imply choices; none are simple and some are far from comfortable. The subjects covered include air, soils and water, sustainable food and farming, countryside, marine stewardship, planning policy, public spaces, biodiversity, and noise. Policy has to respond to society's aspirations in all these fields and articulate choices that enable competing interests to be balanced. The reform of the CAP and development of Pillar II policy regimes signals a major period of evolution. For land managers and countryside interests the emergence of Natural England is an important threshold. If the vision is to deliver the preferred outcomes in this period it needs to:-

- make clear the rationale for broad policy principles.
- facilitate a coherent approach to the application of policy instruments.
- contain simple, clear aims that will engage everyone concerned.

Key challenges facing the natural environment.

The first challenge identified in this event was in the policy structure - namely in the creation of clear working relationships between DEFRA and Natural England (NE) and, similarly between NE and the Environment Agency (EA). The challenge goes much deeper into the coherence of government policy in relation to a diversity of policies that lie beyond DEFRA's remit, for example energy, transport, housing and trade. All these affect land use, and all are affected by the existing uses made of land.

Tensions already exist on the ground because of duality of interest in environmental issues and the separation of Government responsibilities between Departments. The agreement of the DTI to the siting of a Wind Farm on Romney Marsh, including a National Nature Reserve, provides an example in point. Despite objections from every local authority concerned, and apparently without regard for the public investment in the natural environment and the gain that has been achieved, a wind energy project has been agreed at ministerial level. Differing strands of government policy therefore have a major part to play in the achievement of a coherent approach to conserving, enhancing and managing local natural resources.

These sorts of issues raise the question - just what is government's role? Is it to determine the kind of environment in which society should live - or is it to enable individuals, groups and bodies within society to make their own informed choices? Given that the processes of life are not static, indeed change is inescapable by reason of emerging technologies and new social values, what becomes necessary is a system of checks, balances and reconciliation. Society has to navigate a route through new threats and opportunities. Government's role was agreed to be one of facilitation, enabling people to make the choices that for them will deliver the best outcomes. Where it goes beyond this and intervenes to control certain behaviours there needs to be a clear rationale and an overall consensus. The vision for natural resources is not seen as a 'management' statement in an interventionist sense - rather it is intended to provide an over-arching rationale that should reach across government and facilitate coherent activity among Departments, e.g. ODPM, which has control of Planning, and HM Treasury because of its responsibility for public finance.

Recognising that the success of policy will depend heavily on the extent to which goodwill can be harnessed, participants pressed the view that a major goal must be to enable people on the ground, managers and entrepreneurs in particular, to deliver the desired outcomes. It was seen as important to foster relevant training and development whilst retaining - and reinforcing - many activities where much good is already being achieved. Instability in policy may mean that these activities are put at risk.

Delivery requires the engagement of people as a whole in the conservation and enhancement process, it can happen on many levels and in different ways. Ideas included exploiting loyalty to local identity as a positive method or, for a more pronounced effect, the use of economic instruments such as the revaluation of local tax on the basis of resource consumption; the idea being that until individuals are impacted results will be meagre.

The UK simply does not own enough 'environment' for the size of its population and competing interests are very apparent, most notably in the land use planning area. Some solutions are fairly readily available - paying landowners to store water for example. It was thought, however, that more innovation will be needed including more radical and controversial measures that will mean

winners and losers and have political consequences.

Where the precious nature of a localised asset is apparent, e.g. a deep peat flow landscape, a small and scarce resource, the case for conservation and appropriate management requirements is readily accepted. Other areas are much more complex. Wales, and other parts of the UK, for example, urgently need economic development, yet their very 'nature' is a significant part of what they are and how they play into society's overall scheme of values. Plainly the population most concerned with these national assets should have a major role in determining their future. Perhaps, therefore, it was argued, the vision and these challenges need to be resolved much more on the basis of the self-interest of those most directly affected. Localities should be 'made' to make the decisions. Controversial though such language may seem now, it may well be viewed differently in 10 years' time when other changes such as global warming have worked forward.

Working within economic realities.

The seminar was mindful of the inescapable influence of economic factors. The challenge for government is to allow choices to be made in the best informed manner, and that in its turn depends upon the range and quality of data and its interpretation. A current and increasingly noticeable trend is to adopt a 'numeric' approach. Language based on numbers is now credited with a near automatic authority and such calculations sharply influence policy making notwithstanding that in some cases figures are used to create biased 'evidence' to promote special interests. Meanwhile, the inarticulate non-numerate - often urban and rural poor - do not have their interests represented by opinion-formers and politicians.

A challenge for leadership was identified by the seminar. Government must first inspire landowners to engage yet further in its agenda so that they will influence matters within their control, Second it must inspire confidence in the policy architecture and the management processes applied. Third, it has to involve the population and communities. A component of this is to overcome difficulties of language - the vocabulary of climate change was described as "disaster movie language" and the term "biodiversity" is simply not widely understood outside the field of the specialist. The "environment is seen as something that is experienced at the weekend or when David Attenborough is on TV". In short, the communication issue is to make the environment everyone's business not just for the weekend. It requires leadership across the whole community.

A challenge in doing this arises from the low quality of public debate and impotence of local authorities when important but controversial actions are needed. The example of waste management makes the point. Many local authorities are running out of land-fill space, hauling waste many miles at tax-payers' expense, and failing to make the best further use of much naturally derived waste that could be used as fuel, or, when properly processed, returned to land or cycled into other processes. The most frequent cause of much of this inefficiency is the orchestrated objection by residents to incinerators and large-scale waste plants near their communities. Usually, opposition is the result of carefully planned selective and hostile public information and press articulation by pressure groups. Apart from the waste of resources involved and the downstream inefficiencies, there are two serious consequences that arise from this situation. First, local authorities seem almost powerless to influence local outcomes in favour of their own communities. Second, communities are not learning to take responsibility for their own environmental and resource impacts - a lesson that surely must be needed in the timescale of this vision.

Realistic land management expectations?

Within reason it was argued, the land can deliver almost anything, given confidence, trust and goodwill, and subject only to the limits of soils and topography. Policy, however, can seem remote from this reality and the day-to-day operations that make this possible. One key to this lies in better consistency and integration. For example, there is little use in a coppice industry that is not served by a local processing plant to optimise the economics of production because planning consents do not harmonise with energy policy and consequent cropping practice. More and better integration of effort seems essential to the delivery of the vision and much can be achieved. Worryingly, some trends are moving the wrong way. The new agri-environment schemes appear to rely heavily on "farming by numbers"; width prescriptions for field margins, and prescribed regimes of husbandry again provide the example. This it was argued is yet another potentially deskilling trend.

Much to be preferred would be individuals operating more freely inside an agreed framework. This in turn would contribute more to multi-functionality, enable more advantage to be taken of new technologies and systems, and moves into new crops. Such a framework simply needs to allow more choice, including the development of an economic framework to allow the changes to happen. The psychology of this is important. New opportunities are appearing and perhaps more land will be managed less for the food chain and more for carbon and other public goods. Different mind-sets are required.

Concerns were expressed about the loss of knowledge and experience in land management because of the trend away from family succession. However the view was expressed that succession is less of a problem than meeting the expectations of the next generation of farmers and land managers. They are operating in a much more harsh and competitive economic climate which is breeding a more aggressive business style and they are understandably not prepared to accept a lifestyle which is disadvantaged when compared with others. They are often more assertive and demanding when dealing with policy and administrative obstacles to progress. Examples were quoted where farmers and land managers have been characterised as less valuable business partners, for example when dealing with agencies and local authorities ("I am just a farmer - regarded as slightly stupid - and so other businesses, less expert than me, are offered contract opportunities that I have been trying to open up for several years!"). This is an important point in the context of integration of effort to conserve and enhance natural resources, particularly for Water Framework Directive impacts, and the development of ELS and HLS. The schemes that stem from the vision will need better leadership to exploit the business acumen that is undoubtedly present on the ground.

The uplands are at present particularly vulnerable. The reduction of livestock production undermines the maintenance of upland

landscape. A few farmers may benefit, e.g. in SSSIs, but under the new schemes the majority will not. The lowlands too are now being affected by these changes; stock levels are reported to be falling. The importance of the synergy between the flow of livestock from upland to lowland, is not being taken sufficiently seriously. There is, too, a damaging 'industrial psychology' which perceives commercial farming as a negative influence in ESAs.

The seminar was challenged to think about land as a bank about which choices of use can be made. For example, are we expecting the land to absorb too much green waste; might we do more cleaning of our water in the catchments instead at the water works? The need to obtain an accurate picture of the change of land use and to assess the impacts on conservation and enhancement and was also recognised. The use of land for energy crops, bio-fuels with the associated changes to its management, character, and associated environmental impacts drew a mixed reaction. The need for a serious attempt to move towards meeting the renewable fuels obligation target was strongly stated. Better use of set aside represented a minimal response.

Concluding this attempt to state some realities about expectations, the seminar addressed a number of specific issues that will determine what might be achieved.

- Advice is needed; an advisory system that works effectively at the individual level is thought essential. This was not a plea to return to former models but to match the provision of advice to the changing structure and agenda of farming in the 21st Century. .
- Who owns the land? Ownership determines a great deal; together the National Trust, RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts are thought to own approaching 20% of the land. They can play an important role in achieving environmental objectives
- Land close to development has 'hope value' based on the possibility that it may receive planning position.
- More land will be used for amenity, various forms of recreation and to provide utilities for urban populations.

How can an integrated vision be applied to all these categories? Can we make quantum leaps in land care by innovative solutions? One suggested was the organised collection of sheep-dip.

Realism is necessary, but there are some grounds for optimism. The seminar was convinced that food production, albeit in differing forms, will always feature as the major land use, and make the major contribution to environmental gain. Farming is uniquely placed to deliver positive environmental benefits. Farmers, it is believed will continue to be alert and responsive to market signals and through a diversity of responses tap into the vigour of the national economy. However, although diversification is working at the individual level it cannot replace the need to adapt to widespread structural change. There are now, apparently, more horses than dairy cows in this country - which emphasises the point that in the commercial market more than food production is involved.

Received wisdoms and mantras will not deliver the new vision. Clear and accurately targeted policy instruments that operate within the new economic framework must be the starting point for informed choices. In the language of the analysis leading to the drafting of this vision, the need is to conserve, enhance and manage. For its delivery we need not just direction from government but the enthusiastic participation by all those who make day-to-day decisions about the use of land.

Addendum.

Seminar participants were invited at the end of the debate to state in under one minute their most significant point or points from this debate. The following is a synopsis of those points.

1. The real common interest for DEFRA and Farming is in the education process - to secure an impact on the ODPM.
- 2.1. Land Management simply must engage with water services. 2.2. There is a failure among agencies to declare the "state" of local environments.
- 3.1. Thirteen years - and we are still having to make the "Rio" case ! 3.2. Environmentalists and Land managers are of one mind - the environment is not "just something for the weekend".
- 4.1. There is a huge amount of innovation possible - so far it has all been small scale and niche. 4.2. Retailing and distribution of food products can be done differently.
- 5.1. There needs to be a will to link environmental and farming business activity. 5.2. We have to inform local people about an environmental culture.
- 6.1. The 1947 Agriculture Acts ushered in the era of Food and Timber - we now use the land for a whole new range of services. We need to think more about the use of carbon.
7. Clarity. Co-ordination. Opportunity. We need these simple messages.
8. 1. The gathering of more information is necessary; there is lots going on and lots of change not adequately captured.

Government and communities are therefore not properly informed for decision taking.

9.1 Communication is being encouraged, the vision is the right way - but it needs to be built on and locally interpreted.

10.1. Communication and engagement is essential. 10.2. The vision is an enabler for lots of different people, planners, advisers etc.

11.1. Radical changes are taking place and we are underestimating the effects. 11.2. Payment and uncoupled payments pay for outcomes that preserve the past rather than the outcomes we now need. 11.3. The industry is more subtle and confused than we realise.

12.1 Re-assured by a debate of the highest order. 12.2. Consensus seems to be that the vision is fit for purpose - it needs development both in terms of upwards and downwards. 12.3 Its messages need to be clear and better.

13.1. Farmers will develop, but the stability and flexibility components are essential.

14.1. Communication and leadership are needed - bear in mind "followship". 14.2. Enabling is needed - leadership again. 14.3. Landowning 'power' also relates to leadership.

15.1. There is a lot of 'communicating' going on and interest out there. 15.2 There are many good things going on too - DEFRA could find out more about the results being achieved and build further on this eg. LEAF, FACE and more.

16.1. There is an erosion of skill at farm level, and at the scientific research base. We are in danger of losing key scientific knowledge and much depends in the future on sound science.

17.1. Re-assured: this is a new era for land managers. More change is to come bringing challenges and opportunities. 17.2. We need to deliver what the public wants. 17.3. Change is uncomfortable and this new era will not be stable - it will be changing continuously.

18.1. DEFRA needs to be brave and to push forward with these ideas and if they are well articulated farmers and land managers will react positively. 18.2. A Preface is needed - which is a commitment to work with and positively support farmers and land managers.

19.1. Have confidence in the vision. 19.2 Get away from prescription. 19.3. Listen to ordinary people - they know what 'environment' means.

20.1. Clear messages about the importance of the communication process. 20.2 Groups or networks of farmers and peer audit among farmers are really good ideas; use them with SFP - for compliance and weed out the few rogues.

Finally why do we value our environment? For scenic, economic, biological and recreational reasons - the very reasons we value our wives, husbands and partners.

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The following text was provided by DEFRA to facilitate the work of this seminar.

Why we value the natural environment

We value the natural environment in its own right and for the vital benefits it provides for people.

- It provides the resources we need for our **basic survival** and for **good health** including
 - Clean air to breathe
 - Clean water for drinking and bathing
 - Productive soils and oceans for food
- It provides **natural processes** which protect the environment in which we live including through
 - Maintaining a stable climate
 - Soil formation and the breaking down of waste
 - Controlling disease, pests and natural hazards such as floods
- It provides the resources we need for a **strong and healthy economy**
 - Raw materials for industry
 - Countryside, parks and historic features for tourism and recreation
 - In developing countries sustainable use of natural resources is crucial to economic development and poverty eradication
- It provides a place for **recreation** and contributes to our mental and physical **health and wellbeing**
 - Access to the countryside and coastal areas
 - A high quality local environment, including urban green spaces
- It creates **social and cultural benefits**
 - We value biodiversity at home and abroad and recognise the importance of preserving this inheritance for future generations
 - Our national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and SSSIs are an important part of our national heritage
 - We gain education, knowledge and inspiration through formal and informal interaction with the natural environment
 - Our sense of place and identity is associated with recognised aspects of the natural environment
 - We appreciate the beauty and existence of the natural environment in its own right

All these values, or 'ecosystem services', are underpinned by biodiversity.

Our vision is of a diverse, healthy and resilient natural environment, which provides the basis for our survival, well-being and prosperity now and in the future.

Our vision

A world in which:

- There is no further loss of diversity of animals, plants and habitats, and biodiversity is valued, safeguarded and enhanced for future generations.
- Our oceans, seas and inland waters are clean, healthy, safe and productive.
- The air we breathe is free from harmful levels of pollutants.
- Our soils are protected and managed to support a wide range of functions, including agriculture and biodiversity.
- We have sustainable, living landscapes which can adapt to change and where the best features are conserved.
- Everyone lives in an environment which is enhanced by nature and everyone is able to enjoy the health and well being benefits which access to the natural environment can bring.

Delivering our vision

We will take action at home and abroad to conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment, for its own sake and to safeguard its value for people, now and in the future.

- We will halt the loss of biodiversity in the UK and will work with our international partners to deliver a significant reduction in the rate of loss of global biodiversity
- We will continue to deliver improvements in air and water quality in the UK
- We will ensure that our landscapes, forests and soils are managed sustainably
- We will seek to deliver a fishing sector that is sustainable and profitable and supports strong local communities, and is managed effectively as an integral part of coherent policies for the marine environment
- We will improve access to the countryside, coastal areas, and open spaces (including high quality urban green spaces)
- We will seek to take a more holistic and integrated approach to the natural environment, and will extend the ecosystems approach in both policy making and delivery
- We will develop a better understanding of where environmental limits lie and take steps to ensure that they are not breached
- We will seek to understand the effects of cumulative and combined pressures so that we can develop a robust framework for future development decisions that respect environmental constraints
- We will take steps to address the impacts of climate change on the natural environment, and consider what role the natural environment can play in both mitigating and adapting to climate change
- We will work to ensure that everyone understands and recognises the value of the natural environment
- We will do more to help people make more informed choices about the impact of their actions on the natural environment
- We will ensure that the negative impacts of our domestic policies on the global environment are anticipated and that action is taken to avoid or minimise them
- We will show global leadership by conserving, enhancing and managing the natural environment in the UK, and

sharing best practice internationally

- We will promote the sustainable use of resources for poverty eradication in developing countries

RURAL's FUTURE SEMINARS

will continue to examine policy themes central to the development of policy for Farming, Food and Countryside.

See the next RURAL Briefing

RURAL plans to continue to programme events which capture this WAY AHEAD theme with the aim of promoting constructive input to the policy overlay beneath which farming food and countryside practitioners function.

Do you have views on these issues or indeed on other issues to which RURAL should turn its attention?

If so, please contact the Director RURAL,

Membership of RURAL costs £15 (individual) or £500 (Corporate) and enables supporters to contribute to the policy information and development process. It brings RURAL Briefings, important network opportunities and access to topic information.

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