

Farmland could turn into meadows after Brexit, says Michael Gove

Gove will tell farmers that the current subsidy regime, which rewards land ownership, will be replaced by a scheme focused on supporting the environment



£2.6bn is spent each year in farming subsidies in the UK. Photograph: Loop Images/UIG via Getty Images

Damian Carrington
Environment editor

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Farmers will get subsidies for turning fields back into wildflower meadows after Brexit, according to environment secretary Michael Gove.

More than 97% of the UK's wildflower meadows have been destroyed since the second world war and their loss has played a significant role in the falling numbers of bees, birds and other wildlife.

In a speech to the Oxford Farming Conference on Thursday, Gove will make his clearest statement to date that the current subsidy regime - which largely rewards ownership of land - will be replaced by a scheme focused on supporting environmental benefits such as tree planting, wildlife and improving water quality.

Currently 80% of the £2.6bn spent each year in farming subsidies is used for the "basic payment scheme" (BPS). Gove is expected to tell farmers at the conference: "Paying landowners for the amount of agricultural land they have is unjust, inefficient and drives perverse outcomes. It gives the most from the public purse to those who have the most private wealth." Recent reports have highlighted a billionaire Saudi prince and wealthy British aristocrats as major recipients of subsidies.

Instead, the environment secretary will say: "After a transition, we will replace BPS with a system of public money for public goods. The principal public good we will invest in is environmental enhancement." He is expected to tell farmers a five-year transition period will be used to smooth the way to the new regime.

Setting out what this will cover, Gove will say the government will design a scheme to support almost any landowner in "planting woodland, providing new habitats for wildlife, increasing biodiversity, contributing to improved water quality and returning cultivated land to wildflower meadows or other more natural states".

Gove, a prominent leave campaigner during the Brexit referendum, argues leaving the EU will allow the UK to improve environmental protections and has pledged green standards will not be weakened.

However, many major conservation organisations including the National Trust, RSPB and WWF are concerned that some existing protections, which mainly derive from EU law, could be lost after Brexit.

In October, the Greener UK coalition warned that the current EU withdrawal bill "rips the heart out of environmental law" by omitting the principles of precaution and that polluters should pay, and also by losing enforcement bodies. Gove has since promised consultations on these issues, which campaigners say must be published as soon as possible. But Greener UK also remains concerned that government plans do not fully transpose all EU environmental rules into UK law.

Gove will be the first environment secretary to also attend the Oxford Real Farming Conference, which runs at the same time as the more traditional gathering. At the Oxford Real Farming Conference, Green Party MEP Molly Scott Cato will call for an end to the use of

agricultural land as a tax shelter.

“Gove must call time on the UK’s largest land owners who are using agricultural land to hide and shelter their wealth,” Scott Cato said. “Agricultural land offers generous tax breaks as it is exempt from inheritance tax after two years if it is actively farmed. The fact that the sale of a farming asset can be rolled over into a new business or acquisition offers further tax relief.”

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