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Net-zero target for emissions poses challenge

There has been much concern among hill farmers and crofters about the recent Scottish Government commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2045. That is, to reach a point where the same volume of greenhouse gases are being emitted as are being absorbed.



This concern is understandable. Under current calculations, extensive livestock grazing is seen as a net emitter of greenhouse gases. And large scale tree planting has been highlighted as one of the potential solutions to achieving this target in Scotland.

However, most hill farms and crofts consist of a wide variety of rough grazing. Although much of this is poor from a livestock nutrition perspective, it does have the potential to store carbon - especially below ground.

The challenge is being able to assess the scale of that sequestration accurately, cost-effectively and robustly. But if that can be achieved – and there is much interest in doing so – then it is likely that Scotland's hill farming and crofting landscapes would be seen in a different light.

It is also important to remember that the climate change issues that need to be addressed are not solely focussed on greenhouse gas emissions. There is also a need for actions to mitigate the ongoing effects of climate change.

For example, our hills and uplands have a vital role to play in reducing flood risk lower down catchments, whether through peatland restoration or the appropriate planting of trees in particular places to help hold water back.

And even where more tree planting is seen as essential for carbon sequestration, there are many ways that those trees can be integrated into hill farms and crofts. This could be in the form of planting along watercourses or in shelter belts.

But as a recent farm woodland conference highlighted, there is also scope to consider creating woodlands within which livestock subsequently graze. Thereby maintaining agricultural production while also achieving multiple outcomes from that one area of land.

The challenge going forward is to ensure that such multiple benefits – and any trade-offs associated with these – arising from active management of our hills and uplands are taken into account alongside the focus on greenhouse gas emissions.

There is no doubt that contributing towards the 2045 target will be challenging for hill farmers and crofters. But this does not necessarily mean that we are going to see the wholesale replacement of farms and crofts by woodlands and forests.

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