

Climate measures must not damage farm biodiversity

Last week The Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs, Islands & Natural Environment Committee invited me – together with others - to suggest what they should focus their scrutiny on during this Parliamentary Session.

I started by highlighting that there is a need to be very clear about the outcomes desired before seeking to change any policies or land management practices. And while producing food is clearly important, future farming systems will also need to help address climate change and biodiversity declines.



Irrespective of whether it is action for climate change or biodiversity, doing so at scale will be essential to make significant differences. But we also need to recognise that we have failed over the last 30 years to deliver that scale of change needed to halt most biodiversity declines in Scotland, let alone reverse them.

Therefore what we need – but do not seem to be seeing so far – is for biodiversity outcomes to be mainstreamed in the same way - and at the same scale - that climate actions are now starting to be.

And we also have to be careful that the actions taken to address climate change do not impact adversely on biodiversity needs. For example, planting trees to sequester more carbon but doing so on land important for wading birds like lapwing and curlew.

This will not only mean that broad biodiversity outcomes need to be given due consideration when developing greater environmental conditionality on future land management support payments.

It also will also mean ensuring the continued availability of funding for the more detailed and targeted actions needed to produce biodiversity benefits where conditionality on its own is insufficient or inappropriate.

Just as importantly, it will also mean debunking the myth that managing land for climate change or biodiversity outcomes only benefits wider Scottish society. Farmers and crofters are not immune to climate change. Hence the vast majority of land use or land management changes made on their farms and crofts will also increase their own future sustainability and resilience to climate change.

For example, Kirkton & Auchtertyre farms sit in one of the wettest areas of Scotland, with between 2.5m and 3.5m of rain per year. Nevertheless, we have seen drought-like conditions over recent summers and are keen to integrate more trees into the farms to provide increased shelter for livestock during both summer and winter.

All of these new trees will bring biodiversity benefits. But while some will be planted alongside burns – to help hold back water and mitigate flooding downstream – many others will need to be integrated within the grazing areas to provide the shelter where the livestock need it.

Hence managing land for biodiversity on our farms and crofts does not automatically imply that agricultural management ceases.

Indeed, for many of the biodiversity outcomes we need to achieve in Scotland, it is about getting the type, timing and intensity of the management right, not stopping agricultural management altogether.

Ensuring greater sustainability will be key for all land management systems going forward. This can be achieved by using existing resources more effectively through precision farming approaches and also managing biodiversity and natural capital more appropriately.

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<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-press-and-journal-inverness-highlands-and-islands/20211002/282389812643902>

So one of the key issues the Committee will need to consider in this Parliamentary Session will be how to ensure that biodiversity outcomes are included appropriately within the range of outcomes we need land managers to deliver in the future.

And this will also need to include how best to ensure that farmers and crofters get recognition and financial reward for providing many of these additional biodiversity and environmental benefits to wider society.

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