

Fifth meeting of the Just Transition Commission Agriculture and Land Use

26 November 2019, 10:00 – 16:00

Ormiston Institute, Melrose

Commission attendees

Professor Jim Skea (Chair)
Lang Banks, representing WWF Scotland
Colette Cohen
Professor Mike Danson
Richard Hardy, representing Prospect
Rachel McEwan
Dave Moxham, representing STUC
Norman Kerr
Kate Rowell
Tom Shields

Apologies

Karen Turner
Charlotte Hartley

For agenda item 2 only

Ruth Taylor, Policy Manager, National Farmers Union Scotland
Jane Salter, Head of Environment Policy, Agricultural Industries Confederation
Steven Thomson, Senior Agricultural Economist, SRUC

For agenda item 3 only

Vicki Swales, Head of Land Use Policy, RSPB Scotland
Hamish Trench, Chief Executive, Scottish Land Commission
Stephen Young, Head of Policy, Scottish Land and Estates
Eleanor Harris, Policy Researcher, Confor

Secretariat attendees

Colin Seditas, Scottish Government
Lauren Begbie, Scottish Government

1. Welcome and overview of the agenda

1.1 Professor Jim Skea welcomed everyone to the meeting. The meeting started with the Commission discussing topics and questions they wished to raise in advance of the first information gathering session.

1.2 The secretariat provided an update on progress against actions from the previous meeting. It was confirmed that all outstanding actions had been completed or were currently being progressed.

1.3 There was discussion regarding the upcoming conference call to consider arrangements for the interim report. The secretariat were asked to circulate papers in advance of the meeting.

Action point 1: secretariat to draft interim report structure (before 6 Dec)

2. Information gathering session 1 – Agriculture

2.1 The Chair welcomed guests to the session and started the session.

2.2 The group explored current progress on reducing emissions in the sector and the huge variance in performance that is seen. It was acknowledged that there had been lots of emissions reduction activity in the sector, but given the opportunities available, why was more not happening? Emissions vary due to a wide range of factors beyond the control of individual farms / businesses, for example seasonal climate fluctuations and land capability. It was also felt that many farms work “year to year” rather than make longer-term plans which would be essential for emissions reduction. Similarly, guests highlighted the prevalence of small family businesses (where farmers often have other jobs) and the age profile.

2.3 The CAP system of payments and subsidies was described as one of the main barriers to innovation and change in farming. Clarity on future policy decisions regarding a replacement for CAP is needed to give direction to the industry. Commissioners heard how the Scottish Government has committed to maintaining the current levels of funding provided via CAP for the next 5 years to provide the industry certainty, but long-term planning is needed to help the sector navigate emissions reduction.

2.4 Discussions then focused on barriers to new entry. It was felt that high capital costs was a barrier to attracting start-up businesses. Formal qualifications are less common than in many other European countries, but it was felt that higher entry requirements of this kind this would be an unwelcome further barrier. It was noted that any incentives for training and up-skilling would need to be flexible, given that needs vary hugely between farms and regions (i.e. what works in the borders, may not work in the highlands). Some felt that the succession of the next generation of farmers often drives innovation and change and it was acknowledged that there need to be mechanisms in place to help facilitate intergenerational transfers.

2.5 It was felt that the sector has the potential to be severely affected by the transition to net-zero if it is not managed correctly. There was a great deal of opportunity associated with land’s capacity to act as a larger carbon sink: diversifying a business was key to its strength. It was important to look to improving efficiency and innovation among the large numbers of small holders, and not just focus on the big producers. Tree planting, for example, was noted as an emotive topic, that was generally seen as of little interest to smaller farmers. It was reported that funding mechanisms tended to favour big projects. Given the wide variety of farming systems, it was usually best to judge a producer’s performance within the system,

rather than the system itself.

2.6 It is unlikely that all parts of the sector will be affected equally: for example, the transition might impact on ruminant livestock and red meat producers, abattoirs and vets and the profit margins in many of these areas is already extremely tight. There is also a high risk of unintended consequences associated with changed practices, for example, removing cattle from uplands could lead to reduced biodiversity. Some felt that a clearer pathway or route map to a net zero future was needed, and that the sector needs direction, guidance and support. Importantly, it was felt that Agriculture cannot be considered in isolation from other parts of the rural economy.

2.7 There is a general resistance within the sector to further regulation. However, the sector would be more receptive if communications more clearly showed the link between regulation and Scotland's net-zero target. Any future regulation would have to focus on the steps, and not just on the outcomes. To keep up momentum and engagement, farmers need to be rewarded for participation and not just the results.

2.8 The Chair ended the session by thanking participants for their involvement.

3. Information gathering session 2 – Land Use

3.1 The Chair welcomed guests to the second information gathering session of the day.

3.2 The group began by exploring the evidence base for land use. It was reported that the evidence base is focussed more on emissions than sequestration, but that there is lots of evidence on emission reduction pathways for land use and the range of pathways available. There were concerns that, although there is good data and research available, more frequent "honest conversations" need to take place about the impact of (government) decisions on competing demands. It was felt that the sector has tended to be dealt with in isolation and the development of wider regional land use strategies has stalled due to a lack of political will. However, there was a general consensus, that the situation is improving, signalled by the inclusion of a regional land-use framework in the latest Programme for Government and Climate Change Act.

3.3 The land offers great potential for carbon sequestration. The Commission heard that although work is on-going to restore peatland through the Peatland Action Plan, agricultural land is currently not being managed to its maximum potential for carbon sequestration. The policy framework is already there and the political will is now there, but to ensure delivery, there needs to be funding. There also needs to be a clear and robust delivery framework in place.

3.4 Conversation then focused on regional plans and how these might work in practice. In relation to the catchment area for plans, Local Authorities can provide a starting point but there needs to be flexibility in order to gather a full range of views

for each region. Regional plans need to be integrated strategically and there also need to be mechanisms for local communities to provide input in to land use changes. The planning system provides an opportunity for formal input but it was noted that there should be better ways to do this through regional plans.

3.5 In general it was felt that there needs to be a joined up approach to considering land use issues: agriculture, land use and forestry strategies needed to be joined up. Guests felt that the sector needs guidance and financial support. They noted the variety of demands facing land managers to deliver on a wide range of issues (food supply, biodiversity, emissions reductions).

3.6 It was noted that there are lots of benefits associated with peatland restoration and that Scotland is just starting to touch on its potential. Currently there is a well-functioning training programme, but there needs to be encouragement for active management and a well-functioning carbon market. It was also discussed how previous policy decisions, for example with regard to previous demands for forestry, are still affecting peatlands. This is a long-term policy issue. Degraded peatlands are a result of a number of factors, including, deer; livestock pressure and tree planting. There are a number of difficult discussions and decisions to be made with regard to peatland.

3.7 The Chair ended the session by thanking participants for their involvement.

4. Review of information gathering sessions and stock-take

4.1 The Commission discussed the evidence they had heard earlier in the day. It was agreed that both sessions had been productive, with a range of opinions and perspectives heard from both guests and those that had submitted written evidence for the meeting.

4.2 There was then a discussion regarding the NHS Health Scotland submission. The secretariat were asked to arrange a meeting between NHS Health Scotland and representative Commissioners (Norrie Kerr and Mike Danson) to discuss further.

Action point 2: secretariat to arrange meeting with NHS Health Scotland

Action point 3: secretariat to make administrative updates to work plan, and finalise Commission meeting dates for Spring / Summer meetings.