



ELM: What are Defra ministers going to do about it?

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A new report from the Government's watchdog, the National Audit Office, is highly critical of Defra's Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme, and the lack of evidence to support the department's assumptions about its projected outcomes, particularly in relation to food security and increased productivity. This mirrors previous research led by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH), which identified a high risk of displacement of food production as a result of yield-reducing ELM options, with unknown effects on either domestic food security or the environment. Reports that the UK is set to import more oilseed rape than it produces for the first time ever this year therefore pose a dilemma for the new ministerial team at Defra. In a Labour Government elected with a commitment to drive economic growth, and whose leader has repeatedly declared that "food security is national security", why would Defra ministers make a commitment to maintain the outgoing Government's flawed policy blueprint for agriculture without first examining the evidence behind it, asks mixed farmer Paul Temple.

Recent [reports](#) that the UK is expected to import more oilseed rape than it produces for the first time ever this year, with the harvest area at its smallest for 40 years and yields lower than elsewhere in Europe, present an early challenge for the new ministerial team at Defra.

According to the incoming Government, the solution to the UK's debt crisis lies in wealth creation, and yet this unprecedented situation will further damage the nation's balance of payments.

Prime Minister Starmer has also repeatedly declared that "food security is national security", and yet our ability to supply this vital food and feed ingredient is at an all-time low, with likely knock-on effects for yields of other crops given the proven soil health and agronomic benefits of including oilseed rape in arable rotations.

So, what are Defra ministers going to do about it?

Of course, this situation is not of the new Government's making. It has been caused by a combination of factors: adverse weather conditions preventing crops going in the

ground; loss of neonic seed treatments resulting in widespread flea beetle damage; and the previous administration's fixation with the introduction of farm policies more focused on feeding wildlife than humans.

But I'll pose the question again. What are Defra ministers going to do about it?

I am perplexed by early signals from the new Government that it is committed to maintaining the Environmental Land Management (ELM) framework for post-CAP farm support payments, despite widespread concern that the policy may irrevocably damage our capacity for home-grown food production.

Like others before me (eg see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), I have also [argued](#) that Defra's ELM policies will not only reduce domestic output, and increase our reliance on imports, they will also impact the infrastructure of the entire farming industry, for example in terms of its contribution to the rural economy, career opportunities for the next generation, and its attractiveness to those investing in and bringing forward innovation.

The lack of forethought behind the ELM approach was amply demonstrated by Defra's knee-jerk decision in March this year to limit uptake of some non-producing payment options under the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) to 25% of each applicant's farmed area, following reports that huge swathes of our most productive farmland, whole farms in some instances, were being entered into such schemes.

After Defra recently published [statistics](#) showing that UK farming profitability fell by 19% in 2023, wiping £1bn off the bottom line, it is entirely understandable (and predictable) that some farmers, particularly those getting on in years, might react in this way to the increased volatility we have seen in recent years.

So, armed with such a commanding political majority, and with a mandate to drive economic growth and safeguard the nation's food security, why would Labour ministers make a commitment to maintain the outgoing Government's flawed policy blueprint for agriculture without first examining the evidence behind it?

It's a question the Government's own spending watchdog, the National Audit Office (NAO), has also been examining.

Tasked with ensuring that the Government's policies offer value for money and will deliver on their stated objectives, the NAO recently published a [highly critical report](#) on Defra's 'Farming and Countryside Programme', which notes that the department's 'iterative approach' to developing policy (ie on the hoof, as with the 25% cap) is 'creating widespread uncertainty and risks for the sector.'

The NAO report also repeatedly highlights the lack of evidence or data to support many of the claims and assumptions made by Defra about the objectives and projected outcomes of its policy programme.

In other words, the department may be playing fast and loose with the farming industry, and with our future ability to feed the nation profitably and sustainably, in favour of unproven and unmeasured environmental objectives.

Agricultural economist Graham Brookes has previously [argued](#) that the post-Brexit policy re-set for UK agriculture should have begun with a coherent land use strategy, to

provide a clear, evidence-based assessment of the competing demands and priorities placed on the UK's land resource, and that this should have preceded the development of farm policy options under the ELM scheme in England and its equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The NAO report appears to agree with this analysis, noting that while Defra has indicated that it intends to publish an assessment of how productivity gains are expected to offset the impact of its agri-environment schemes on food production as part of its planned Land-Use Framework, it has not yet done so.

The NAO report states: "Until this analysis is published it is difficult for parliament, the sector and the public to understand and scrutinise what government is trying to do."

When the main policy mechanism for delivering improved farm-level productivity comprises grants for equipment under the Improving Farm Productivity scheme, and yet the scientific evidence shows that by far the biggest driver of crop productivity gains is access to improved genetics, this should raise serious questions about the scientific basis for Defra's thinking.

It is certainly difficult to understand what Defra have been trying to do and, as Science for Sustainable Agriculture has previously [highlighted](#), independent research commissioned by Defra has identified a high risk of displacement of food production as a result of yield-reducing ELM options, with unknown effects on either domestic food security or the environment.

So, why would the new Ministerial team at Defra not view the NAO report as a further red flag, and the basis for a fundamental re-think of the direction of travel?

Paul Temple manages a mixed arable and livestock farm on the East Yorkshire Wolds, producing cereals for seed, oilseed rape, vegetables and beef. He is a past vice-president of the National Farmers Union, former chairman of the Copa Cogeca Cereals, Oilseeds and Protein Group, and founder of the European Biotech Forum. Paul is also a board member of the Global Farmer Network, which brings together strong farming leaders from around the world to amplify the farmers' voice in promoting trade, technology, sustainable farming, economic growth, and food security.