

Brexit needs you!

Ask not what Brexit can do for you but what you can do for Brexit. After the risible departure of the band of Brexiteers and some fairly comical (or is that spiteful) cabinet appointments a modicum of leadership does appear to be emerging. Now, however, is not the time to be waiting around to see what happens next, now is the time to help shape the future.

In amongst Mrs May's emollient speech in Berlin this week she stated that "...as long as we are a member of the EU we will respect the rights and obligations of EU membership." This is why I find it curious when people say that they are "awaiting decisions" about RDPE funding or that there is confusion surrounding the current round of applications. Based on the almost daily conversations we have with Natural England and the continued flow of application packs, the RDPE schemes appear very much open for business. Indeed it is all very well for the usual industry bodies to state their priorities for rural and agricultural policy and seek reassurance from the government about the future funding but they, as we all do, need to engage with the current schemes. When ministers look at the uptake of the current schemes to gauge the level of support required in the future do you think they will necessarily stop to consider whether it has nose-dived due to a less than



ideal implementation in 2015 or Brexit uncertainties? Of course not, they will simply say farmers aren't taking up these schemes and therefore we don't need them. Even if they are not totally your cup of tea, it's a question of use it or lose it. We will be in a much stronger position to influence what happens next when we do finally leave the EU if we can say we did engage, we did try and we did deliver; but based on our experience we would like to do it differently.

There is no doubt in my mind that we all have a duty to help shape future policy and the ability to do that is greatly increased by engaging in current policy. If you are able to empathise with that sentiment you might like to make representations to the government's Environmental Audit Committee inquiry into the "Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum". The deadline for submissions is 9 September and the enquiry

will cover future funding for biodiversity and agri-environment schemes, changes to devolved administration and the role of "rewilding". The last point is an interesting and perhaps surprising inclusion. While I have been involved in some very worthwhile rewilding projects I can't say that I'm convinced that it should be the focus of achieving the co-production of market and non-market goods, which I believe will be increasingly important in the future.

In shaping future policy we need to get smarter about why we want funding or relaxation of rules or opening of new markets. It's not sufficient to say "we want the government to commit to continue to fund rural policy." A commitment George Eustice has already given on a number of occasions. We need to set out why and what the return on investment will be. It's not sufficient to say "farmers produce public goods," or are "stewards of the countryside," we need to spell out the value of all that farmers produce; the air we breathe, the water we drink, the landscape we enjoy as well as the food we eat. What's more it is entirely possible to quantify these contributions. Did you know for example that Kent's woodlands provide £73million of avoided costs to the healthcare system by filtering out particulate pollution known as PM10? Corporations such as National Grid and Network Rail are already valuing their natural assets and have produced accounts mon-

etising the shared value that society benefits from. All this is before considering the value of producing food. With a weak pound and reliance on imports, food prices will go up and there will obviously be discussions about subsidising farmers to both manage food prices and retain a level playing field with our subsidised competitors.

There is little to be gained from standing on the side-lines waiting for policy to unfold; getting involved, forming opinions on Canadian insurance models or Farm Assurance as greening equivalence, or multi-annual combined pillar 1 and 2 agreements, or a three pillar system is more important than ever. So too is understanding the true value of your assets. Lack of engagement will surely lead to lack of support, lack of funding and lack of interest from Mrs Leadsom, who after all seems to have been sent to Defra in much the same way as being sent to Coventry.



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