

# WAR REMINDS US OF LAND USE PRIORITIES

The clue was always in the name. The Environment Act, which recently became law and sets out the post-Brexit policy framework for farming, was always going to be more about the environment than it was about agriculture.

Watching the terrible scenes unfold in Ukraine over recent weeks has reminded us all of how lucky we are in so many ways – but it's also raising a host of huge questions, and our how we use land is one of them.

What Putin has done, in a few short weeks, has shown that the actions of one man can turn the world's food and energy supplies on their head. We simply can't ignore this.

In terms of government policy over the past few years, the emphasis has shifted from food production towards environmental protection and stewardship. Yes, we need more trees to combat climate change and we need to reverse the biodiversity decline, but conversations about food and energy production have been sidelined.

This isn't new. I'm old enough to remember when MAFF (the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) was renamed DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). You could argue it was semantics, but that signalled a shift in focus.

At least we seem to have moved on from the days of one-time DEFRA secretary Margaret Beckett, whose view seemed to be that given we were a relatively wealthy nation – and that the world is, in theory, capable of producing masses of food – it was fine to simply rely on imports. The shocking scenes of a war in mainland Europe, with all its terrible humanitarian consequences, has exposed the flaws in that approach.

The Covid-19 pandemic also made us realise how fragile food supply chains are. Empty shelves focused consumers' minds and, for a while, we viewed farmers – quite rightly – as key workers. It's quoted in slightly differently ways (and variously attributed to everyone from Lenin to MI5) but



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there's a saying that is very true: Society is only three meals from anarchy.

The truth is, though, governments have a short memory and policy seems to vacillate, often overly influenced by environmental groups with huge memberships and correspondingly strong lobbying powers.

As an industry, we have been given different signals and different support systems encouraging different – and sometimes mutually exclusive – goals. Right now, understandably, a lot of farmers are looking at how they can maximise environmental payments to put a floor into their income as a result of the disappearance of BPS. But what happens in five years' time if the government decides to replace the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMS)?

Farming is a long-term endeavour. It can't change direction every election or – heaven forbid – every time we get a new DEFRA secretary. Ultimately, the personalities probably aren't that important, but the fundamentals are.

This lack of vision at policy level makes it hard for individual businesses to make decisions, because they are led by policy as well as by market signals (obviously the two are often connected).

Clients sometimes tell me their kids don't want to come into the business because they don't know what being a farmer means anymore. How can you want to do a job when you don't even know what the job description is?

Prioritising food and energy production, alongside sensible environmental measures, necessitates joined-up thinking, but there are too many contradictions at present. Take tax. Despite all the encouragement to manage land in an environmentally sensitive manner, some of the best accountants in the country are asking government whether income from stewardship will be deemed as agricultural and therefore Agricultural Property Relief will still apply – but are still not getting an answer. It's difficult, and often unwise, to make big decisions without knowing the impact it will have on your inheritance tax relief position.

It's the same with the planning rules. The biggest problem any prospective renewable energy project faces is how to navigate the planning system. A few years ago, there was a huge amount of interest in wind turbines, but the environmental lobby – and often NIMBYs – effectively scotched many of the opportunities. Ditto large-scale solar farms: a lot more could be developed if planning policy was more supportive.

When I criticise government for not putting sufficient emphasis on food production, I'm not making a political point. This is relevant to all future governments of all political persuasions. Recent world events do have the potential to change policy, though.

I've had more conversations over the past few weeks about growing wheat than I have in the past few years, which is hopefully indicative of the nation's collective new-found focus on food production and energy supplies.

People need to be able to open their cupboards and find food in them, and they need to be able to flick a switch and see the lights go on. Given the right direction, farmers are the ones who can help make sure that happens.



**MATTHEW BERRYMAN**  
Director, CLM  
T: 07710 765323  
E: matthew@c-l-m.co.uk  
www.c-l-m.co.uk

