

## The Future of Upland Farming

The Uplands of England contain some of the most valued and most visited parts of the country. With their unique landscapes, rich biodiversity and attractive villages, they draw the visitor, the tourist, walkers and those seeking space and solitude. The Uplands are currently the focus of interest with the recent publication of Natural England's *Uplands Vision* and with the Commission for Rural Communities report, expected in early 2010, following its enquiry into the state of upland communities. The introduction of the new Uplands Entry Level Stewardship Scheme in January 2010, which replaces the old Hill Farming Allowance, will also bring new challenges to the survival of upland farmers, and hence to the sustainability of this much loved landscape and its communities.

At the moment upland farmers are experiencing a rare recovery in prices. This autumn has seen a much needed increase in returns for sheep and cattle. This is offset for some who, as a result of falling prices in the past and of the requirement of environmental schemes, have reduced their stocking numbers and so have fewer stock to sell. The national sheep flock has, for example, experienced a 12% decline over the past three years. This reduction of available sheep has helped prices to rise, along with the favourable Euro exchange rate which has assisted the export trade. Though the increased returns are very welcome, they are fragile, and no one is assuming they are here to stay.

Stocking levels on the upland remains a matter of tension and dispute. The previous CAP production payments may have encouraged overstocking on some uplands but the frustration for upland farmers is that agreement about the right stocking levels seems to be a matter of guesswork, and it is not clear that those who set the levels are aware of the true nature of upland farming. If stocking levels are too low then farmers cannot make a living and flocks are withdrawn. This can soon result in the degradation of the landscape with an increase in bracken and scrub and the loss of heather. The North York Moors National Park, covering one of the most important heather/peat moorlands in the world, have been concerned about the demise of hill farming in the Park, due to a loss of flocks and farmers from the hills, and are working urgently with farmers to make sure that more hefted flocks are not lost to the Moors. To sustain the uplands there need to be farmers whose activity and livelihoods create and sustain the landscape people love. As one farmer put it, *the farmer needs the countryside but not so much as the countryside needs the farmer*. More account needs to be taken of the views of upland farmers and landowners who have managed the uplands for generations and have a deep understanding of the necessary balance, and interdependence, between environment and agriculture.

Natural England's *Upland Visions* document has, perhaps not surprisingly, attracted much criticism from the farming community, not least because it gives insufficient weight to the hills as an area of food production and economically viable farming activity. However, along with the CRC's forthcoming report on the pressures and needs facing upland communities, the focus is at least on recognising the uplands as a vital national asset, to be supported and valued. In the language used for defining agricultural payment support the uplands were classified as Less Favoured Areas and Severely Disadvantaged Areas. Now they need to be recognised as Most Valued Areas and publically supported because they are a vital farmed and managed habitat. The uplands also have a part to play in addressing the impacts of climate change. The recent record rainfall in parts of the country is a reminder that the uplands hold and store rainfall. By blocking moorland drains and grips, and preserving the peat bogs, the flow of rainwater off the high lands can be slowed and help avoid flooding further down the valleys and onto the lowlands. Peat bogs also lock up carbon deposits that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere. But this preservation of the peat bogs is linked with the preservation of livestock farming on the uplands. An interesting development on a few uplands farms has been small hydro-electricity generation where the flow of upland streams has been captured through a simple Archimedes Screw to produce on farm electricity, and in some cases supply excess to the grid.

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Next year, 2010, will be a particularly challenging year for upland farmers as they come to terms with a major change to support payments for the uplands. The Hill Farming Allowance Scheme (HFA), which provided direct support to livestock farmers on the less productive uplands, comes to an end next years and is being replaced by a new scheme, the Uplands Entry Level Scheme. This new scheme focuses on rewarding farmers, and land managers, for the delivery of environmental and landscape benefits. It is based on a points system with points awarded for a range of environmental options. Points are earned by meeting a set of compulsory requirements and by selecting from a number of further options. Farmer must reach a set target to qualify for payments. The HFA formed a vital part of the income for the majority of hill farmers without which they would not be able to continue to farm and to manage the land. It is not clear how far this new scheme will continue to make upland farming viable. The new scheme requires a five year commitment which does not take fully into account the complex patterns of land rental and grazing rights in the uplands. In the longer term, upland farmers are aware that 2012 will see a new stage in the Common Agricultural Policy. There is likely to be a reduction in the farm support budget as newer member states needs are addressed, and as more of the agricultural support budget is diverted to other aspects of rural development.

Farming in the uplands has created a unique and much loved landscape and it is good to see it receiving attention from, and being valued by, policy makers. However, the future for the upland landscape, and for upland communities, remains uncertain as long as the viability of upland farming is in question.

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