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Agricultural Situation

The Domestic Drivers of UK Environmental and Agricultural Policy

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Approved by:

Peter O. Kurz
U.S. Embassy

Prepared by:

Lesley Bennett

Report Highlights:

UK policy in the area of environment, food and rural affairs is driven by the ideal of sustainable development. This report reviews the main drivers that shape this policy approach and provides specific examples of policies and their backgrounds.

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Executive Summary

Environmental and agricultural policies in the UK are underscored by the principles of sustainable development. The government's policy pursuits rest in turn upon a balancing of the demands of agriculture and the electorate as a whole. As a result of economic and political factors, policies relating to rural countryside tend to reflect the interests of the general public over the specific interests of the agricultural industry. This report discusses the context in which policy decisions are made and also provides several examples of these dynamics and their impact in specific policy issue areas.

Sustainable Development

The UK Government has put forward sustainable development¹ as a primary strategy and goal for the administration. For a policy to be accepted as 'sustainable' in England and the devolved administrations, it must adhere to the five principles reflected in the following statement of approach: "We want to live within environmental limits and achieve a just society, and we will do so by means of sustainable economy, good governance, and sound science."

More specifically, the UK government has identified four key priority areas for policy development:

- Sustainable Consumption and Production: working towards achieving more with less
- Natural Resource Protection and Environmental Enhancement: protecting the natural resources on which we depend
- Building sustainable communities: creating places where people want to live and work, now and in the future
- Climate Change and Energy: confronting the greatest threat.

These rather generic aims have been incorporated into various areas of administration, including rural policy. A recent report issued by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) entitled *Our countryside: the future*, presents a vision for the future:

"Our vision is of rural areas evolving in ways which enhance landscape and biodiversity. It is of a forward looking and competitive farming industry, delivering good stewardship of the environment as well as producing our food. It is of a rural economy based on information technology as well as on traditional skills. In short, not a theme park, but a living, working countryside for real people. We want a countryside which can shape its own future, with its voice heard by Government at all levels."

In order to fully comprehend this language and the agricultural, food and rural policies it spawns, an understanding of UK land-use issues and the context in which they exist is necessary. Through review of this context, it becomes evident that a coherent approach to rural policy involves a fine balancing of the interests of the UK agricultural industry and the collective values of the UK public. This report highlights the issues central to the UK sustainability debate and presents the aims of varying interested groups in the context of specific policies within the UK.

¹ The accepted international definition of sustainable development is: 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'

Background

Despite the resilient nature of UK agriculture, the farming industry does not have a very significant economic or political presence nationally and, as a result, does not wield tremendous influence. The UK, a leading trading power and financial center and the fourth largest economy in the world, is one of a quartet of trillion dollar economies in Western Europe. Despite the intensive, highly mechanized and efficient nature (by European standards) of UK agriculture, the industry contributes just under 0.8 percent (\$9.45 billion) to the total gross value of the economy.

Agriculture makes a similarly small contribution to employment. In 2004, it was estimated that agricultural employees accounted for only 1.9 per cent of total employees in England as a whole. As technology continues to advance, making agricultural production less labor intensive, a further 15 per cent reduction in the total agricultural labor force is forecast by English Nature by the year 2010. Moreover, increasingly international markets for food make the production of food in the UK that could be produced elsewhere at a lower cost anachronistic. More and more, the UK government looks toward agriculture as a means of securing a range of public goods other than food security.

As a result of these dynamics, UK policymakers tend to give traditional farming interests a low priority when shaping the nation's agri-environmental policies. More often than not, rural policy approaches agriculture through the lens of land use and management of the countryside (including the debate on conservation and sustainability issues.) The clearest explanation for this may be found in the simple fact that, in a country of approximately 60 million people (twice the population of California) with a land area of only 93,000 square miles (about the size of Oregon), access to land resources is necessarily a competitive matter. The interests of the general public, in particular the present Labour Government's largely urban constituency, are generally more influential to UK politicians than are those of farmers.

Given that about 75 per cent of the UK's total land area is agricultural, it becomes apparent that what is generally termed the 'countryside' and understood as a public asset is often, in fact, commercially productive agricultural land. It is also worth noting that, with only a few exceptions, the UK does not have the great swathes of 'wilderness' recognized, protected and made accessible to the public through a national parks system as comprehensive as that found in the United States. Furthermore, as most urban dwellers are only a short drive from the countryside, it is only logical that it has come to be understood as an accessible collective resource. A 2002 survey conducted by Defra illustrates this accessible nature of the countryside: 81 per cent of respondents were found to have visited the countryside for pleasure in the twelve months preceding the survey, 23 per cent said they visited the countryside for pleasure at least once a month and 14 per cent said they visited at least once a week. Given these dynamics, it becomes clear that UK agricultural land, or 'countryside,' serves multiple purposes and is as important as a resource for recreation, biodiversity and tourism, as it is for food production.

As a member of the EU, the UK must act in accordance with the political aims of the region, but European law is usually issued in quite broad terms, leaving Member States discretion as to creating their own terms of implementation. As such, this gives the UK some flexibility in constructing specific policies – for example, it allows them to pursue more environmentally rigorous initiatives than some neighboring Member States. However, it is important to keep in mind that the general direction of UK agri-environmental policy is further influenced by Brussels.

At present, the EU is deeply engaged in the WTO's efforts to liberalize agricultural trade and has considerable appreciation for the idea of markets and consumers as the primary drivers of farming and land management decisions. The EU is also concerned with the costs of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to tax-payers, especially in light of continued EU expansion. Within Europe, the concept of 'multifunctional' agriculture has become quite accepted. Under this new European model, the agricultural industry is seen as a provider of a range of environmental and socio-economic services as well as products and commodities.

Examples of UK Agricultural, Food and Rural Affairs Policy

Policy initiatives in the area of sustainable consumption and production, natural resource protection and environmental enhancement, building sustainable communities, and climate change and energy have clear links to the agricultural industry. However, the following few examples highlight how the interests and concerns of the general public in issues such as food quality and safety, recreation and environmental conservation are reflected, and often take precedence, in the UK's policy agenda.

CAP Reform

The recent reform of the European Union's CAP is symptomatic of the global trend away from direct production support. While at the European level, this reform is designed to enable a process termed "market rationalization," which allows farmers previously locked into production-oriented land management to increase their profits by discontinuing their farming activities in favor of diversification, UK implementing legislation emphasizes the role of the farmer as a land manager rather than food producer. Policy analysts describe the reforms as leaving only four main areas for viable farming in the future: specialist producers of bulk commodities, specialty value-added producers, alternative forms of land use and management, and enhancing and restoring countryside (as a social and economic asset, i.e. tourism related employment.) This result reflects the desires of a public concerned with cheap food prices and maintaining the aesthetics of the countryside. Approached through the lens of land use and management of the countryside, the policies governing the UK's farming subsidy system imbue farmers with the obligation to provide the countryside required by the public for its varied purposes including food production, tourism, recreation and ecological biodiversity.

Food

Of increasing importance to the UK public is the quality and source of their food. For example, awareness and consumption of organic foods have increased steadily in recent years, albeit still remaining low in volume. At the European level, legislation such as the Traceability Directive stresses the importance of food quality and transparency for the consumer. As a result of these pressures and CAP reforms, farmers are being steered into specialty and value-added production. As Defra describes their policy aims in the area of food production: "In modern times Britain has never been self-sufficient in food production. After the Second World War boosting food production became a more important policy goal – sometimes pursued at the expense of the long-term sustainability of the industry and our countryside. But today there is a growing recognition that change is needed. There is a need for new and better farming practices, a change in the balance and co-operation across the food chain, real efforts to protect and enhance the environment. The reform of the CAP sought by the UK will alone not be enough. The challenge for the industry is how to create fresh prosperity, how to preserve and enhance our environment and contribute to stable rural communities. In other words the challenge is to rebuild a food and farming industry which is sustainable."

Environmental Stewardship

CAP reform policies encourage farmers to seek an increasing proportion of their income from alternative sources. This dynamic, which has been termed "farm diversification," will inevitably yield a different looking countryside. In order to address the public's concern regarding countryside preservation, the UK government has introduced the Environmental Stewardship scheme. Under this scheme, environmentally friendly farming practices will be better acknowledged and rewarded. The five primary objectives of Environmental

Stewardship are: to conserve wildlife; maintain and enhance landscape quality and character; protect the historic environment and natural resources; and, promote public access and understanding of the countryside.

Land Use & Protected Landscapes

The English countryside is often conceptualized in static terms, with references to the “chocolate box” landscape implying its unchanging, timeless nature. Although the countryside is in fact very much a changing construct, especially reflecting changing patterns in the agriculture industry, protective landscape designations have been championed by the public and utilized in England through the establishment of local landscape designations. The idea of national designations for protected land has been growing since the mid-20th century, when the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 established National Parks in England and Wales (the first in the Peak District in 1951). More recently, legislation allowing for statutorily designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty has been adopted.

Local landscape designations have long been criticized by farmers for their susceptibility to abuse by local authorities who hand out permits in order to serve their own political purposes. Given that especially as a result of CAP reforms, farmers and rural land managers are increasingly seeking to diversify their land use in order to maintain the economic viability of rural life, the conflict between the interests of the agricultural industry and the general public's concern for the countryside is apparent. In the face of such divergence, a compromise favoring the interests of the UK public is likely. Experts expect that in the years to come, while the numbers of local landscape designations will decrease, the number of nationally designated, strictly protected landscapes will increase.

Public Access to Countryside

Public access to the UK countryside is an important issue within the UK. According to statistics gathered by The Ramblers association, the UK are avid walkers with 77per cent of UK adults, or about 38 million people, walking for pleasure at least once a month. 891 million day trips for leisure in Great Britain in 1998 included a 'walk, hill walk or ramble'. This is 15per cent of the total of all leisure day trips. Public access is also important to the UK's tourist economy. Walking is the most popular activity for visitors to Wales (Wales Tourist Board) and is the second most popular activity for visitors to Scotland (Transport for Leisure Ltd Smith 2001). Seven million visitors walk in the UK countryside every weekend (Countryside Agency 1998).

With this in mind, the UK has taken special care to make the countryside more accessible for recreation. The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 provides for the creation of long distance paths, access agreements to specific areas of open country, the surveying and recording of all footpaths onto a definitive map and the production of the Country Code. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000 gives access to mapped areas of open countryside and, importantly, introduces the concept of Rights of Way Improvement Plans. These plans give the public the ability to serve notice on highway authorities to remove obstructions and introduces a cut-off date for claiming rights of way that existed before 1949. Likewise, in 2003, the Land Reform Act was passed in Scotland giving a general right of statutory access to all land and providing for the development of local path networks by councils. Eventually, this Act will give Scotland the best access regime in Europe.

Such support for public access to land and rights of way necessarily implies some infringement on the property rights of owners. Recalling that much of this now-accessible countryside is, in fact, agricultural land, policies in this area must involve a compromise to

mitigate this clash of interest. In acknowledgment of farmers' concerns, the 2001 Amendment to CROW Act served to limit public access to existing footpaths. The minor nature of this modification reveals the tendency of the UK government to devalue farming interests.

Conclusion

As a small island nation, a number of conflicting demands are made on the UK's limited land resources. In the case of agriculture, the increasing influence of urban populations, both politically and geographically speaking, is evident through the dramatic change in the policy approach of the UK government from the post-war years through to the present day. Rather than being unique, it is expected that this change in stance is likely to increasingly be repeated elsewhere in the world as reliance on the land as an amenity, rather than a source of direct income, increases.