



Policy briefing

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The new Agriculture Bill – our key asks

The Scottish Government has outlined in its Vision for Agriculture that it intends to “transform” support for farming and food production for Scotland to become a “global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture”.

Soil Association Scotland has welcomed the ambition in the Vision, particularly commitments to farming and crofting with nature, reducing agrochemical usage, enhancing animal welfare, increasing the amount of land managed organically and integrating trees on farms.

The Agriculture Bill will provide the framework to deliver on the Vision’s goals for high-quality food production, climate mitigation and adaptation, and nature restoration. The Bill is expected to grant powers to ministers on agricultural and rural development policy, while enabling tailored provisions and support to be outlined in secondary legislation.

Allowing for the fact that this is a framework bill, there is still an opportunity for the government to set out key principles to be applied to future policy, such as the fairer distribution of public funds to support agricultural activity.

The government has also stated that it intends to remain broadly aligned with changes to European Union (EU) policy and we note the parallels between the Vision and the new EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) objectives. We argue that government should go further and set targets for increasing land under organic management and reducing the use of synthetic fertilisers and chemical pesticides in line with the EU Farm to Fork strategy.

In advance of the Bill being introduced to parliament, Soil Association Scotland has prepared this summary of our key asks.



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1. *The Bill should include a strong and well-defined **purpose clause**.*

This should link to the high-level policy ambitions covered by the Vision for Agriculture and outlined in the consultation documents for this Bill – high quality food production, climate mitigation and adaptation, nature restoration and rural development. It must also state that the purpose of this Bill is to drive transformational change in our farming and food production system to address the climate and nature emergencies, and it should refer to alignment with the new CAP.

2. *The Bill should require the government to produce a **strategic plan** for agriculture.*

The strategic plan should emulate the EU CAP Strategic Plan process, setting out a wide range of interventions and explaining how these will help meet the objectives of the Vision for Agriculture. The strategic plan should be consistent with other Scottish Government policy, including the Biodiversity Strategy, the Natural Environment Bill and the Land Reform Bill. This plan should be subject to a process of parliamentary scrutiny.

3. *The Bill should set **programming periods**.*

We agree with the Scottish Government that the new support framework for agriculture must be flexible, but we also think that farmers and crofters are looking for long term certainty about the shape of public support for agriculture, so there needs to be a degree of stability. The EU CAP ran in cycles, and the Scottish Government ideally should be aiming for something similar – from at least a three-year but anything up to a seven-year programming period – linked to the strategic plan and allowing for monitoring and evaluation of progress towards targets and objectives.

4. *The Bill should include a mechanism for **redistributive payments** for smaller farms.*

The CAP Strategic Plans Regulation (EU) 2021/21151 introduced a mandatory requirement for EU member states to allocate at least 10% of direct support to redistributive payments, so that more of the budget is directed at small and



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medium sized farms. The Bill should allow for a delivery mechanism for frontloading support. If the Scottish Government maintains the current three region model, then we would propose at least 10% (and up to 30%) of the direct support budget is used to provide a single payment rate redistributive uplift for the first 32ha of each claim.

5. *The Bill should set targets to **reduce usage of pesticides and fertiliser.***

The EU Farm to Fork strategy set targets for reducing the overall use and risk of chemical pesticides by 50% and the use of artificial fertilisers by 20% by 2030. The Vision for Agriculture committed to accelerate the adoption of approaches and measures which minimise, reduce and remove the use of agrochemical inputs and increase the use of non-chemical related actions. To drive change, this should be made explicit in the Bill, with targets set for both pesticide and fertiliser usage reduction in line with Farm to Fork.

6. *The Bill should include a target to increase the amount of **organic land.***

The Vision states that the government wants to 'encourage more farmers and crofters to farm and produce food organically'. There is strong evidence to show that organic production systems lead to reductions in agricultural emissions and increases in on-farm biodiversity. Increased domestic production will also deliver economic benefits by meeting consumer demand for organic produce. Scotland should align with the Farm to Fork ambition of 25% organic land share across the EU by 2030, which has led to comparable member states such as Ireland setting a 10% target.

7. *The Bill should support the **integration of trees on farms and crofts.***

There are significant climate and nature benefits from integrating trees on farms and crofts. Support for farmers and crofters to plant trees in carefully designed systems should be embedded within the four-tier support framework, and the Bill should set an ambition to meet more of the Scottish Government tree planting targets from agroforestry and farm woodland systems. Soil Association modelling suggests that integrating trees on 1-5% of farmland could lead to an additional 342,000ha of new woodland and trees outside of woodland by 2050.