



Patrick Barker

Arable Farmer

Lodge Farm,
Westthorpe, Suffolk

Introduction

Patrick Barker farms a 550 ha arable farm in North Suffolk. The farm is a family-owned partnership, with Patrick and his cousin Brian running the farming and environmental contracting business. Situated on clay soil, the farm grows cereals, spring linseed, spring beans and herbage grass seed.

How important is nature friendly farming and why?

Nature friendly farming is fundamental to what we do. We live and work on the farm, we're here every day, so it is important to us that we can combine our passions of conservation and farming. We're also keen to demonstrate that a modern, intensive arable farm can be bursting with farm wildlife.

How do you see the role of the farmer in the UK?

Farming is the industry that underpins everything else, so farmers have a big responsibility. From food production to environmental land management, what a farmer does really impacts everyone in one way or another. On our farm, the crops we grow go into the early stages of lots of food chains. This is why it's vital that farming is done properly and alongside wildlife.

What nature friendly farming practices have you introduced on your farm?

Since entering Higher Level Stewardship scheme in 2007, we've developed a more holistic approach to the way we integrate farming and conservation. We manage our land as a whole farm ecosystem. This means taking marginal land out of production; managing, restoring and creating new habitats like wildflower meadows, hedgerows and ponds; a flexible tillage system; and introducing cover crops for soil health and clean water.

What have been the impacts of nature friendly practices on your farm?

We're contributing to healthy soil, clean air, clean water and species recovery. We know from studies that our farmland wildlife population has gone through the roof – barn owls, yellowhammer, grey partridge, great crested newt and small mammal populations have increased dramatically whilst swallows and pied wagtails have returned as breeding birds. From a farm business perspective, we also know that earthworms are increasing, there's more soil organic matter, and the water leaving our farm is the cleanest it has ever been.

Will Brexit affect you and how?

Yes, massively. A change in subsidies will change the way we farm. A tougher, more business focused approach will force a more streamlined and efficient way of farming, for the benefit of nature. The proposed new system of public money for public goods should benefit the environment more and should enable our conservation work to move to another level.

What do you think of farming policy and what needs to change?

The Agriculture Bill is a positive move for British agriculture, and it should be embraced. This should increase both productivity and reduce our impact on the natural environment. Ultimately it will focus farmers' minds on how to run businesses better, benefit nature and the climate, and bring people together. Hopefully the new system will enable knowledge exchange between farmers, reduce our reliance on pesticides and fertiliser and encourage connection with the general public.

What do you need from consumers – how can they help?

As a nature friendly farmer, I want people to enjoy, appreciate and respect the environment in equal measure. I would urge consumers to buy locally and look at the way the food they buy is produced, ensuring that it comes from farms and producers that have an awareness of and a responsibility for the natural environment.

What nature friendly farming methods do you need financial support for?

Small incentives across the board can make a big difference. As well as well-designed environmental stewardship schemes, we need things like appropriate tillage, solar generation on farms, rainwater recycling, habitat creation and restoration, cover crops, and public engagement. A specific example for arable farms like us would be financial support to integrate the right sort of livestock grazing with cropping systems. As an industry, we've forgotten how to do it and lost the benefits. I would also want financial support to monitor environmental outcomes and promote our positive impacts.

How do your farming practices make you more resilient to climate change?

For our crops, soil health is the most important thing. The quality and permeability of our soil is increased, and through our ponds and ditches we have very effective ways of managing wet years. Most importantly, in terms of climate change prevention, farmers are key – beneficial environmental management and good carbon stewardship can reduce the effects of climate change for everyone and slow the process down to allow society to adapt.

How will we get farming to change?

Change is inevitable and Brexit has started the ball rolling. Farming businesses will be squeezed financially, and under the proposed new policies it would seem that environmentally friendly farming will be the only way forward if farms are to remain profitable and beneficial.

What is the value of the NFFN?

The NFFN brings together proper farming with consideration of the natural environment and farmland wildlife. It is an organisation which can pull together all interests within the industry, regardless of farm type, size, location, and farming style, for common goods like benefiting agriculture, the environment and farmland wildlife.

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