Nature Friendly Farming Network

The nature of business

Delivering resilience, food security and economic value through nature-friendly farming

Foreword

Rachel Solomon Williams, Executive Director, Aldersgate Group

UK farming faces more complex pressures than ever before. Farmers are contending with volatile input costs, disrupted global markets, and a climate that is already affecting what they can produce. At the same time, businesses across the food system are becoming increasingly aware of the financial risks linked to degraded soils, declining biodiversity and unpredictable weather. Nature-friendly farming can help to tackle those complex issues holistically, underpinning long-term resilience and competitiveness.

This report makes clear that working with nature can strengthen the fundamentals of farm businesses. Healthier soils reduce reliance on costly inputs; more diverse landscapes buffer farms against climate shocks; and restoring ecological function opens up new income streams and financing options. For many farmers, these approaches are already improving profitability while reducing exposure to risk. A nature-positive farming sector also strengthens national food security, underpins the resilience of supply chains and reduces future economic shocks that would otherwise be borne by households, businesses and Government.

Given the number of issues and stakeholders involved, Government intervention is needed to set coherent, long-term frameworks that reward whole-farm approaches and align economic incentives with environmental outcomes. The Land Use Framework is a good start, but needs to be integrated with other policies, including the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Biodiversity Net Gain and forthcoming water legislation.

Businesses will also need to play their part by supporting farmers, investing in resilient supply chains and recognising nature as integral to economic value. Many businesses are already doing just that. Others are still trying to understand how they can get involved in a way that is coherent with their wider business strategies while supporting sustainability. However, neither public policy nor private investment can deliver the transition alone. The UK population needs Government, industry and farmers to work together to address these systemic risks quickly.

Foreword

Martin Lines, CEO, Nature Friendly Farming Network

The alarm bell is ringing ever louder. With more than 70% of the UK's land managed as farmland, farmers are one of the most powerful tools the Government has to deliver food security, biodiversity and climate targets. However, UK farming is in a challenging economic position. Without clear direction from Government and policymakers, uncertainty remains high, and action is too slow.

The UK has an opportunity to turn this around. Long-term farm business resilience, against both market and climate pressures, depends on working in harmony with nature. The research in this report shows that the current farming model is not delivering for farm profitability or the environment. If we continue to degrade natural assets, the consequences for farming will be severe. Business as usual is not an option.

Is it time to rethink the role of the farmer in society? I believe it is.

For decades, farmers have been defined primarily as food producers. But this has come at a cost to nature, climate and, increasingly, the quality of what we produce. Today, much of our land is not producing food for people, but feed, fuel or other outputs, while our landscapes are being pushed towards their limits.

The future role of farmers must be broader: delivering food, fibre, energy, climate mitigation and nature recovery. The evidence from nature-friendly farmers shows there is a balance – a sustainable level of production that supports both profitable farm businesses and a healthy environment.

Getting this balance right is critical. If we push beyond what the land can sustain, both nature and farming businesses will suffer. If we fall short, we risk failing to restore nature. Neither is acceptable.

Government must now act with ambition, providing the long-term direction farmers need to build resilient businesses that produce healthy food and protect our natural world for future generations.

JOANNE COATES

Introduction

UK farming is entering a period of profound change. The following trends highlight the scale of the challenge – and the opportunity.

The challenge facing UK farming

Volatility is the new normal in farming, from international conflicts and their impact on energy and fertiliser prices, to the impacts of a changing climate: hotter, drier summers, wetter, milder winters, and more frequent and extreme weather events.

As the UK Government's own food security assessments[1] show, the biggest threat to domestic farming and food production is the dual nature and climate crisis.

This crisis is already impacting UK farming, the UK economy and the many supply chain actors that depend on farming outputs, both within and beyond the UK.

Analysis by the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) shows the UK has experienced three of the five worst harvests on record since 2020, reflecting an accelerating trend of climate volatility. In 2025 alone, UK arable farmers lost over £800m due to crop failure and reduced yields following wet winter conditions and record summer temperatures.[2]

The UK's Met Office highlights the risks to livestock health and productivity through projected increases in temperature and humidity conditions that cause heat stress.[3] In the South West, which holds the largest number of dairy cows of any UK region, heat stress conditions could increase tenfold by the 2070s, from the current average of two to three days a year to nearly 30. In Eastern Scotland, a region with significant potato production, incidences of potato blight – a crop disease that thrives in warm, wet weather – could increase in frequency by 70%.[4]

> "We wouldn't have a business if we weren't working this way. With external costs fluctuating almost daily, it's impossible to financially plan. Now, we are much more resilient and no longer dictated by external factors."
>
> **Ruth Ashton-Shaw**
> **Low Auldgirth Steading, Dumfries & Galloway**
> **Organic smallholding**

Why the current system isn't working

Decades of Government and private market signals have created untenable dependencies across much of UK farming, from fossil fuel-hungry fertilisers to animal feed grown overseas.

Systems of production that depend on high levels of inputs, rather than what the land can naturally produce, trap farmers on a production hamster wheel that rarely makes financial sense, while also leaving them more vulnerable to climate and market shocks.

These systems drive a range of domestic and global problems including soil degradation, overseas deforestation and socioeconomic impacts such as low profit margins for UK farmers and the displacement or marginalisation of rural communities in global commodity hotspots.[5,6] The scale of these impacts has become a national concern. In 2026 the UK Government released a national security assessment that sets out the risks that degraded ecosystems pose to UK food security, economic stability and international security.[7]

The opportunity for change

Business as usual is not a viable option. A rapid transition to nature-friendly farming will empower and enable UK farmers to revitalise the health and heart of our farmed landscapes. In turn, UK farming can fulfil its potential as a powerhouse of sustainable production: of food, feed, fibre and the environmental public goods – such as positive water management – that domestic production depends on. This will boost farm business profitability and contribute to national growth and stability, both directly and indirectly through the many private sector actors that rely upon farming's outputs.

Many UK farmers are demonstrating nature-friendly farming in practice, pioneering new approaches and revitalising older methods of production to meet 21st century challenges. This report profiles some of the many benefits nature-friendly farming can generate at farm scale, nationally and across the private sector, outlining the key changes needed to unlock its potential at all three levels.

Benefits of nature-friendly farming at the farm business level

Nature-friendly farming is an active choice to farm *with* nature and natural processes, maximising nature's considerable abilities to do for free what would otherwise need to be paid for, such as expensive inputs that are increasingly vulnerable to climate- and market-related volatility. It also facilitates farm business readiness for new environmental income streams and helps future-proof access to both supply chains and finance actors that are increasingly focused on derisking their businesses.

> "If you have too many animals or face high input costs, there comes a point where it actually costs you more for every unit of production than you get back. Finding the sweet spot for our farm using MSO has made us much more financially viable and has helped nature and the environment alongside it."
>
> **Esther Skelly-Smith, Shanaghan Farm, Northern Ireland**
> **Livestock**

1 Nature as a business partner – boosting profitability and resilience in a changing climate

High yields do not always equate to higher profits, particularly when those yields are dependent on costly, often fossil-fuel derived, inputs. Work by Nethergill Associates shows that farm businesses have improved commercial returns when their marketable outputs are adjusted to reflect the farm's naturally available resources.[8] This approach, known as Maximum Sustainable Output (MSO), directly supports improved farm business profitability while reducing negative environmental pressures and encouraging more nature-positive land management, creating a positive feedback loop on farm (see page 7).

By taking a regenerative, whole-farm approach, considering areas of habitat and areas of cultivated or grazed land as interdependent and of equal value, a range of benefits is possible.

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- Diversity is key. Increasing the range of plant species grown – whether on arable or pasture – and ensuring soil remains covered can break disease cycles, stimulate plant growth and provide habitats for beneficial pollinators and soil organisms. Similarly, diverse crop rotations and the incorporation of livestock in arable systems support soil fertility, stability and functionality.[9]
- Dedicated flower-rich strips, which can be moved around a farm as needed, support beneficial insect populations that both pollinate crops and consume crop-damaging insects, reducing costs while maintaining or even increasing yields.[10]
- Careful tree establishment provides shade and shelter for livestock, particularly in very hot weather. This can help mitigate heat stress and associated drops in output, such as reduced milk yield in dairy systems.[11]

As many regenerative and nature-friendly practices support the soil's ability to hold and retain water, land becomes much more resilient to changing climatic conditions such as more frequent drought and flooding. Nature-friendly farms, while not immune to the impacts of extreme weather, are often better able to withstand and recover from the production challenges they pose.

There are, however, costs associated with adopting regenerative and nature-friendly techniques, particularly in the early stages when output may initially decline. The yield, ecosystem and financial benefits for farm businesses can take between three and ten years to be realised.[12] Appropriate financial support during this transition is therefore vital, from both public and private sources.[13]

Maximum Sustainable Output (MSO) is a concept and methodology developed by Nethergill Associates which supports improved commercial returns and farm business resilience. By analysing farm business accounts, the MSO approach identifies where current production levels can be adjusted to significantly reduce, or even remove, expensive inputs such as fossil fuel-derived fertilisers and imported feed. The need for these so-called 'corrective variable costs' can be reduced or removed by making production choices that rely on the farm's naturally available resources, i.e. what nature can provide for little or minimal cost, such as photosynthetic solar energy.

MSO can be summarised as follows:

- **Objective:** Maximise commercial returns by adjusting marketable outputs to rely only on the farm's naturally available resources.

- **Methodology:** MSO applies micro-economic theory to farm accounts, analysing revenue, variable costs and fixed costs.

- **Cost Categorisation:** Variable costs are split into:
  - **Productive Variable Costs (PVC):** Essential or unavoidable costs within the limits of the farm's natural resources (e.g., seed, labour, vet costs).
  - **Corrective Variable Costs (CVC):** Avoidable, non-essential costs associated with production *above* natural capacity (e.g., artificial fertilisers, imported feed).

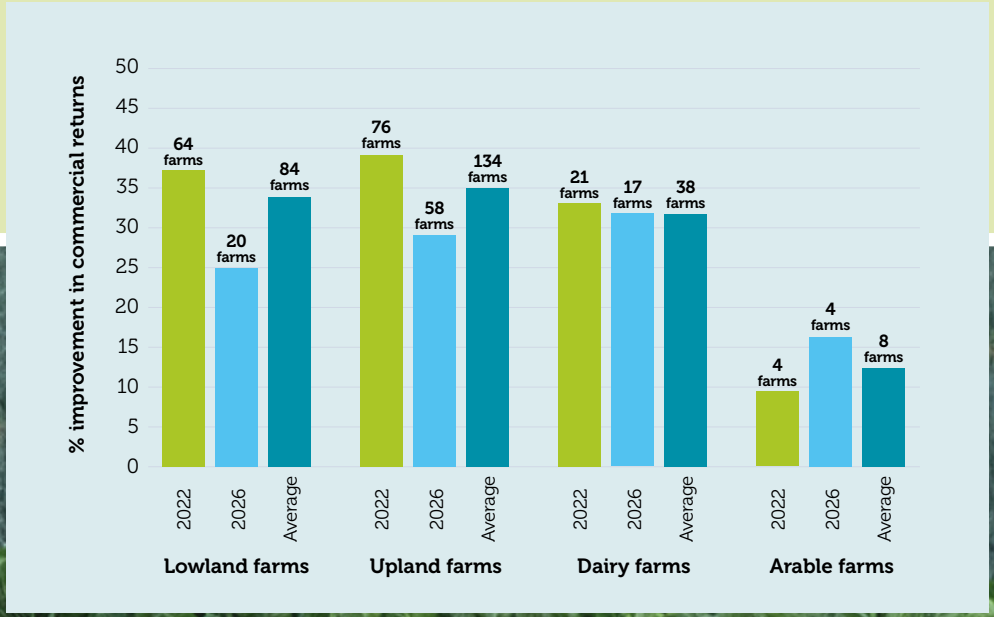
- **Core Finding:** The MSO point, where commercial returns are greatest, is achieved when CVCs are eliminated. Eliminating such inputs can significantly boost farm profits.

- **Results:** Analysis of 165 beef, sheep, dairy, and mixed enterprise farms in 2022 showed an average increase of 10%–45% in commercial returns across different farm types, alongside a reduction of artificial inputs, many to zero. Analysis of an additional 99 farms in 2026 showed an average increase of 16%–32% in commercial returns, reinforcing the significant degree of financial benefit from taking an MSO approach.

- **Productivity implications:** For many farms, the MSO point reflects reduced levels of marketable production/output, which is reflective of a sector that has, for many years, produced beyond its means. However, this is not always the case, and for many farms that have adopted MSO, any initial dip in production levels recovers as the natural fertility and functionality of the land recover.

- **Benefits:** In addition to improved farm business profitability, adopting MSO reduces environmental pressures, benefits biodiversity, and supports improved resilience to external economic and climatic shocks.

Figure 1: % improvement in commercial returns on farms moving to MSO (commercial returns is taken to mean revenues before support, less variable and fixed costs). Source: Nethergill Associates.



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2 Income stream potential from nature and climate action

Transitioning to nature-friendly farming practices creates further opportunities for new income streams at the farm business level.

Publicly funded agri-environment schemes play an important role for many farm businesses by providing payments for specific land management actions. This income is essential to help buffer the transition away from high levels of fossil-fuel-derived inputs and to fairly reward ongoing delivery of environmental public goods that the conventional market fails to adequately value, such as species recovery.

Nature-friendly farming also opens the door to private nature and carbon markets, which are growing exponentially. These include schemes accredited under the Woodland Carbon Code or Peatland Code, Biodiversity Net Gain and water company-funded schemes tackling flood risk and water quality issues.

"Resilient food systems depend on farming that works with nature. Through initiatives such as the Nestlé Milk Plan, we've seen how nature-friendly farming strengthens biodiversity, soil health and climate resilience while supporting food security, livelihoods and reduced risk on-farm. Businesses like ours have a critical role to play by investing in agricultural communities over the long term and partnering with farmers and suppliers to scale regenerative, nature-positive practices."

Emma Keller
Head of Sustainability,
Nestlé UK & Ireland

"We have drastically reduced fuel use; eliminated agri-chemical applications; eliminated grain-feed and bedding straw purchases; increased grass species diversity and species-rich hedge-thickets for shelter. We have a healthy, robust business which has maintained productivity and increased farm profitability (by 25–30% over the last 7 years)."

Denise & Angus Walton, Peelham Farm, Scottish Borders
Organic beef

3 Future-proofing supply chain and finance access

The private sector's expectations of the farming sector are shifting in response to the growing recognition that nature loss and climate change pose unacceptable financial risks.

Unilever, one of the world's largest food manufacturers, announced in 2025 its goal to support regenerative practices on 1 million hectares of farmland by 2030, and has launched projects in the UK to support their adoption, including on farms growing mustard for Colman's.[14]

Nestlé and PepsiCo also have active UK programmes aimed at reducing farming's negative environmental impacts while boosting nature on farms.[15,16]

Financial institutions, such as banks, are also increasingly supporting the transition to nature-friendly farming through preferential finance deals and loan payment breaks for farmers who are adopting these practices. This shift is not driven by philanthropy; nature-friendly farmers are more and more seen as lower risk.[17,18]

Being ready and responsive to these shifts will be vital for any farm business that wishes to remain viable.

ANNA BIESTY

Benefits of nature-friendly farming at the national level

Investing in nature-friendly farming at scale is essential to protect the UK's food production capability and long-term food security, as evidenced by the Government's own food and national security assessments.[19]

Criticism that nature-friendly farming undermines domestic food security by reducing domestic output and offshoring the UK's farming footprint can be countered by the growing evidence base that yields rebound once land has recovered.[20,21,22,23] This simply reinforces the urgency of investing fully in the transition to nature-friendly farming.

Economic risks of inaction

Climate change and more frequent extreme weather conditions are already estimated to have cost the UK's arable farming sector more than £2bn since 2020.[24] The impacts are harder to quantify for livestock farms, but are likely to be broadly equivalent.

This figure underlines the immediacy of the warning, issued by the Green Finance Institute, that, without rapid and robust action, nature loss and climate change could cause losses of 12% to UK GDP – more than double the impact of the 2008 financial crash.[25]

In contrast, investing in nature-friendly farming can generate significant returns on investment, reducing future costs while supporting a sector that is much more profitable and resilient in the short term.

However, there is currently a significant funding shortfall. Existing sources of finance, largely publicly funded, are failing to meet the estimated costs associated with land-based nature and climate action.[26,27]

Such investment is not only imperative for future food security, it is also essential to meet a range of legally binding climate and environmental targets.

"My floodplain meadows are species-rich, great for nature and protect communities downstream from flooding, so this needs to be recognised as a public good and directly supported financially."

Debbie Wilkins
Norton Court Farm, Gloucestershire
Mixed Farm

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Nature recovery and biodiversity

Farmland birds – widely accepted as an indicator of biodiversity more broadly – are inherently dependent on how farmland is managed and their numbers have fallen by over 60% since 1970. The evidence is clear that:

- without positive habitat management on farmland, their numbers will continue to decline.
- tools to support their recovery already exist, particularly publicly funded agri-environment schemes, which reward farmers for positive habitat provision and management.
- these schemes are only successful if delivered at the quality and scale required.[28,29]

A lack of funding and political will across all parts of the UK means the country is currently not on track to halt and reverse nature's decline. In Scotland and Wales, legally binding targets for nature restoration are not yet in place, although welcome and essential legislation mandating that these targets be set was passed in early 2026. In England and Northern Ireland, governments remain far from meeting the 2021 Environment Act target to halt species decline by 2030.[30,31]

Urgent action is needed to unlock the potential of nature-friendly farming, from boosted farm business profitability and national economic performance, through to long-term food security and the recovery of our treasured and iconic species and landscapes.

Government leadership, internal departmental coordination and inter-governmental collaboration are all needed across the UK to provide the right support structures for farmers, including fully aligned public and private finance to address the stark funding gap for nature and climate action.

"Curlew recovery matters. If we can get conditions right for them, we get them right for a whole range of other species too. Farmers are vital because we manage the very places curlew rely on to breed – the grasslands, hay meadows, and moorland that make up our open farmed landscapes. With the right backing, nature-friendly farming can deliver for food production, business resilience, and the recovery of the species."

Sam Kenyon,
Glanllyn Farm, North Wales Livestock

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Benefits of nature-friendly farming for the private sector

Private sector actors, from insurance companies and banks through to food manufacturers and water companies, are increasingly concerned with, and invested in, how farmland is managed. This reflects growing awareness of the direct financial risks posed by ongoing nature depletion and unchecked climate change, and the imperative to manage these risks, including through a transition to regenerative and nature-friendly farming at scale.[32,33]

Business implications of disclosure frameworks

Founded in 2015, the Task Force for Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) sharpened the focus on tackling climate-related risk in the private sector, requiring larger businesses to disclose actual and potential impacts of climate risks on their operations, plus how they would manage them.

Requirements introduced under the TCFD now form part of private sector standards under the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB). They require businesses to report on their Scope 1 and 2 emissions – direct and indirect emissions linked to energy use, respectively. The ISSB has since extended reporting requirements to Scope 3 emissions, which include indirect emissions related to farming. These changes reinforce the momentum behind emissions reductions throughout private supply and investment chains.

Parallel, though less developed and currently voluntary, action is taking place to address the risks of nature depletion through the Task Force for Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) framework. The formation of a strategic partnership between the TNFD and the ISSB, coupled with strong support by the UK Government since the TNFD's inception in 2021, indicates that nature reporting is likely to become a mandatory part of risk-based financial disclosures in the coming years.

Gaining competitive advantage

Such requirements mean that private sector actors who actively support nature-friendly farming, or divest from harmful farming practices, are likely to gain a competitive advantage in the short term and be significantly more resilient in the long term.

Often able to take a longer-term view than governments bound to election cycles, leading private sector players are clear about the changes needed to make nature-friendly farming the new normal.

Facilitative and joined-up finance and policy, accessible advice and guidance, and consistent data capture and reporting requirements are critical to ensure that action across the private sector dovetails seamlessly with public policy incentives.[34]

> "At Anglian Water, we see nature-friendly farming as essential to securing long-term water quality and catchment resilience. By working with farmers to improve soil health, optimise nutrient use and restore natural processes, we reduce pollution at source, lower treatment costs, and build landscapes which are more resilient to floods and drought. It's a practical and cost-effective route to deliver environmental and economic value."
>
> **Richard Reynolds, Senior Agronomy Officer, Anglian Water**

Conclusion and recommendations

The case for nature-friendly farming is clear: at the farm level it underpins resilience, productivity and profitability; at the national level, it is essential for meeting binding environmental targets and ensuring long-term food security; and across the private sector, it derisks and safeguards domestic and global supply chains.

Business as usual is not a viable option. There are many positive examples of leadership and delivery in farming practice and policy (both public and private), but the scale and pace of change do not match the urgency of the challenge, or the wide-ranging benefits available through a wholesale transition to nature-friendly farming.

Securing nature-friendly farming at the scale required will need a suite of enabling legislative and policy responses, particularly at governmental levels, but also within the private sector. Fundamentally, positive change will occur only when all stakeholders, from farmers to ministers and corporate CEOs, recognise the symbiotic relationship between farm produce and the environment, and value all outputs from farming equally, whether food, feed, fibre and flowers, or clean air and water, functioning soils and thriving wildlife.

The following recommendations are not exhaustive, but capture the key enabling actions required to make nature-friendly farming the new normal.

Tackle the funding gap

Current investment in nature-friendly farming is patchy and inadequate. According to independent analysis[35], at least £5.9bn a year is needed to support nature-friendly farming at the scale required in the UK. By comparison, the combined public (i.e. taxpayer funded) budget for agriculture is around £3.8bn a year[36,37,38,39] and only about a quarter of this directly supports practical, nature-friendly farming practices. While private sector investment is growing significantly, it is more difficult to quantify and determine what it is currently buying. Governments across the UK must increase public investment in nature-friendly farming and create robust policy frameworks to ensure private funding is combined coherently to meet the total investment needed.

Drive systems-change through whole-farm approaches

Currently, too much investment in farming, including schemes designed to reward nature-friendly farming practices, is applied piecemeal. Policymakers must move away from 'pick and mix' scheme design and create farming programmes that centre planning and delivery across the whole farm, reflecting the synergies and dependencies between land producing marketable products and land

> "Resilient farming systems that work with nature are fundamental to long-term productivity and food security. Finance has a critical role by supporting the transition to lower-risk, future-ready businesses."
>
> **Nick Evans, Managing Director, Oxbury Bank**

MARTIN LINES

providing environmental goods and services. Similarly, farming programmes must facilitate collaboration between farms on landscape-scale outcomes, such as habitat connectivity, river catchment restoration and flood alleviation.

Tackle siloed governmental decision-making

Farming outputs are varied and relevant to virtually every Government department, from housing to health and national security. However, siloed decision-making – within agriculture departments, between different Government departments, and across the four UK nations – leads to misaligned policy frameworks and missed opportunities to drive a coherent, nature-friendly farming transition. Governments must dismantle these silos through whole-government, outcome-focused governance structures and work more effectively together at the UK level on shared farming challenges and solutions.

Increase nature reporting ambition for businesses

Private sector actors increasingly recognise nature loss as a financial risk that threatens supply chains, but reporting on these risks remains voluntary. The UK Government must champion the evolution from voluntary to mandatory nature-related financial disclosures to drive increased awareness and action on nature throughout domestic and global supply chains.

Develop standardised data and benchmarking

Alignment on sustainability and productivity data across the public and private sectors is essential to manage risk, boost performance and improve decision-making at farm, national and private sector levels. It is also essential to align agricultural import standards with domestic policy and public and private investment. Governments across the UK must collaborate with industry to agree on shared approaches to data capture and its use as an active tool to support and evidence the transition to nature-friendly farming.

Normalise nature-friendly farming through private sector supply chains

Many of the changes outlined above will drive more action and investment across the private sector. However, the sector itself must play a stronger role in championing nature-friendly farming to customers, investors and competitors, helping to normalise these practices and derisk the entire food system.

Invest in critical infrastructure for food system resilience

Facilitative structures for nature-friendly farming extend far beyond the farm gate but are currently inadequate. Rapid investment in more localised infrastructure – for processing, storage and distribution – is essential to derisk our domestic food system, create viable and accessible markets for nature-friendly produce, and directly support food system resilience and economic growth.

"I realised that even with full inputs, my wheat yields weren't justifying what I put in. It felt like we were on a treadmill, with no control over anything. We were effectively working for supermarkets and chemical supply companies, and I didn't like it. A more nature-friendly approach massively reduced our risk and exposure to crop failure because we were spending far less on what we grew. Our output was lower, but so were our inputs, so our margins improved."

Tom Edmondson
Cranley Barn Farms, Milton Keynes
Mixed Farm

SORCHA LEWIS

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