Feeding the Nation
How Nature Friendly Farmers are Responding to Covid-19
With the outbreak of COVID-19 we have seen many challenges across society, and farmers are no exception. There are farmers with food to sell, but many of the usual supply chains are closed. There are farmers with produce to harvest, but a lack of workers to make this happen. We urgently need to support farmers to connect with the public, with consumers right across the country, so they can sell their produce without this food going to waste.

Many Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) farmers are changing the way they supply the food they produce, and are marketing directly to the public, through local supply chains or online. What hasn’t changed though is their commitment to our natural environment and farming, nor their determination to provide the food we all need. We are proud to support them during this challenging time.

A sustainable food supply chain in the UK has never been more crucial to help farmers provide healthy and sustainable food, avoid food waste and protect wildlife and the environment. I urge you to support your local nature friendly farmers during this crisis and beyond.

**Foreword**

Martin Lines  
U.K. Chair  
Nature Friendly Farming Network
Top 5 Ways To Support Our Farmers During Covid-19

Nature Friendly farmers are making sure that they’re producing our food in a way that’s sustainable for nature and our planet, and now they’re keeping us fed during the worst of this crisis. There are five key ways that you can support their efforts during these unprecedented times:

1. **Shop local and sustainable.** Buy fresh, seasonal and sustainable produce from your local online farm shop or market. Find farmers across the UK delivering locally here.

2. **Work or volunteer on a farm.** The UK is facing a potential shortage of 80,000 workers due to COVID-19. If you have the time, find your local farms to help harvest the food for the nation. Here’s a list of organisations that can direct you to the right place.

3. **Join the nature-friendly farming movement for free.** We are stronger together. Join the NFFN for free as a public member to stay up to date with how you can support nature-friendly farmers producing food for the nation.

4. **Try not to waste.** Over 1/3 of food around the world is thrown away. It’s important not to stockpile food that will go to waste. Make sure you plan your shopping trips carefully, buy only what you need, and use up leftovers. Here’s some top tips from Love Food, Hate Waste.

5. **Celebrate the local farmers doing extraordinary things.** To produce the food on your plates while protecting nature. When you receive food from a local producer, share your food stories and celebrate it on social media with #NatureFriendlyFood.
David Walston runs a 900-hectare arable farm in Cambridgeshire that produces mainly wheat, rape, peas, beans and oats. He uses techniques like no-till, companion cropping, bi-cropping and mob grazing to go beyond farming sustainability and actively regenerate the quality and productivity of soils. David has recently launched CoVeg, programme aiming to bring together farmers and their local communities to produce local vegetables which otherwise may not be available.
Tell us why you are a nature friendly farmer?
I care about the nature and wildlife and I am proud that I can do something to improve it. Not only am I seeing more biodiversity on the farm, but nature friendly farming makes business sense. My costs are down, and the farming techniques make us more resilient to changing weather patterns.

What nature friendly farming practices have you introduced on your farm?
I am part of the countryside stewardship scheme which means that I have put aside 10% of the farm for nature. I also practice conservation agriculture, which protects the soil through no till farming, I also plant cover crops and companion crops. I pay a lot of attention to the pesticides that are used and only use them when truly necessary. Roughly 90% of the farm is insecticide free.

What benefits in nature have you seen on your farm?
I have seen an increase in wildlife on the farm including barn owls coming back to the farm for the first time in years. I have also seen an increase in deer. I see more grey partridge than I've ever seen, and there have also been more birds of prey.

How does nature friendly farming make your business more financially viable?
If I can make the farm more resilient to weather events, like droughts, it will be inherently more financially viable because our crops will survive.

Nature friendly farming also reduces our fixed costs. By reducing pesticide usage results in less time spent on smaller and cheaper tractors, which in turn means less diesel spend. It all adds up, nature friendly farming methods are good for the business bottom line.

How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?
I am very lucky that it hasn’t really impacted the farm. I have changed specific practices on the farm to abide by social distancing guidelines, and some people are no longer making deliveries. But, by and large, I have been lucky that I haven’t been impacted.

Are you involved in any initiatives that support the local community or people?
I am starting something called ‘CoVeg’ which is a community vegetable growing scheme for the people in the local village. It’s a large-scale vegetable patch that we can grow together as a community and then distribute the food to whoever needs it most.

What would you like to say to people at this time about the role of UK farms to provide food for people/ protect nature in the UK?
UK farming isn’t perfect and there is a lot of room for improvement, but we have some of the best environmental and health standards in the world.

When you buy imported food, you don’t know how it has been produced, whether they have been farmed with pesticides that have already been banned in the UK because they are damaging the environment.

If you are interested in protecting the environment and helping local businesses, then it is important to buy British when you can.

How should we use this opportunity to buy British and support British farmers?
Consumers can support British farmers by continuing to check labels and knowing where their food is actually coming from.

How can the public benefit from what you are doing on the farm?
We voluntarily provide a lot of public access to our farm. I enjoy that people can experience nature here. I believe that people benefit from being surrounded lots of natural wildlife whilst on the farm, rather than walking through a sterile field of endless wheat or barley.

What do you need from the government?
There are a few things that the government could do to really support farmers.
The first is to develop a farming policy with really clear goals. For the last few years there has been a lot of talk about soil health, but soil health has never been defined. We need clear goals that we can all work towards.

The second is to invest significant funding into practical farming research to truly understand the practices that need to be put in place. With more research we would know what we need to change, how to implement it and how to support farmers in achieving it.

The final thing farmers need from the government is for them to put in place regulation to ensure that imported food is held to the same, rigorous, high standards that British grown food is. If we have banned a chemical here due to its effects on human or environmental health, then we shouldn’t be exporting those problems to another country.

Why is the NFFN important?
Most farmers would like to farm in a more nature friendly way. Farmers like nature and wildlife and most would like to do something to help improve it. The thing holding farmers back is being afraid of change, so to see other people do it, like all the farmers involved in the Nature Friendly Farming Network, gives them the confidence to make the switch.
“I am starting something called ‘CoVeg’ which is a community vegetable growing scheme for the people in the local village. It’s a large-scale vegetable patch that we can grow together as a community and then distribute the food to whoever needs it most.”

DAVID WALSTON, ENGLAND
Sally-Anne Spence
Mixed Farmer
Berrycroft Farm, Wiltshire, England

Sally-Anne Spence is an entomologist and farmer based in Wiltshire. Berrycroft Farm is a family farm, run by Sally’s husband and brother. It produces wheat, barley, oats, and beans - the rapeseed oil goes to McDonalds for frying, the wheat goes to Warburtons for bread. Around 100 acres of grassland is grazed by native breed livestock that actively restore the grassland. Sally’s an enthusiastic science educator who also runs an education and research centre on the farm.
Why did you sign up to the network and why are you a nature friendly farmer?

I come from a livestock and mixed farming background and I know that farming and conservation must go hand-in-hand. 71% of land in the UK is farmed. As a conservationist I need to be working with farmers. As a farmer, I want to see conservation on farms. Nature friendly farming is great for biodiversity and means that we can pay the bills.

What nature friendly practices have you introduced on the farm?

The farm is part of the Higher Entry Level Scheme and we’re involved with a farmland bird project. We work hard to support farmland birds, by; feeding and ringing them to monitor numbers, putting out songbird posts for tree-sparrows and barn owls, putting up feeders and nest-boxes, planting hedgerows and woodland. We are also working hard to restore certain species, including the brown hare, water vole and otter.

Our permanent grasses are grazed by native cattle breeds, which restore the soil. We fluctuate the numbers of stock on grass at different times of year, according to how the grass is growing, which means we decrease animals when flowers are ready to set seed.

We are also working with a local mental health charity by bring people onto the farm who benefit from being outside. I also organise ecology and wildflower walks to help people understand about farmland birds and how we can protect them, as over 70% of farmland birds in arable areas are ground nesting.

How has this impacted nature?

The wildlife count has gone through the roof. A good example of this is the huge increase in gentians and bee orchids. There is a phenomenal number of insects on the farm that are on the species red list species. We are also working hard to restore certain species, including the brown hare, water vole and otter.

How do these methods make you more resilient to climate change?

Healthy soils are crucial to climate resilience. No tillage or minimal tillage drilling makes sure our soil structure is as untouched as possible, which is good for the invertebrates. Dung beetles are really important because they break down dung quickly, which means it isn’t fermenting and producing methane that would otherwise enter the atmosphere.

Permanent grassland like ours sequesters carbon at a good rate. Planting hedgerows and woodland increases our resilience to future climate events and by leaving winter stubble on the ground we are not leaving bare ground open to soil erosion.

What do you think needs to change in farming policy to make sure future of farming supports nature friendly farmers?

Policy needs to focus less on intensive output and more on farming with nature. We must see a reduced reliance on chemicals and increased value in habitats, wildlife and beneficial insects. Technology also has an important role to play to help us farm efficiently without using as many chemicals.

We have to be more sympathetic to the natural world, so policy should incentivise farmers to produce food on farms that work with high animal welfare and environmental standards.

Why do you think that the NFFN is important?

The NFFN allows us to showcase that farmers are conservationists as well. Farmers are custodians of the land – they take joy in seeing nature. The NFFN is a great way to get people to understand that farming isn’t detrimental to the landscape and that many farmers are producing food, whilst embracing nature.

Family farms that have a connection to the land, communities and wildlife are being pushed out by giant estates. These farms must be supported by the public and the NFFN can help with this.

How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?

My own personal business, which is the nature education centre, is dead as it involves people coming here. However, we’re lucky in that the food distribution has not yet been affected.

Are you involved in any initiatives that support the local community or people?

I have also organised a street coordinating group in my local community, to make sure people are registered for food aid. There are over 600 people within parish, I know everybody and have direct contact with the district council, so I set up a coordinated group before lockdown to make sure those who needs extra help can get it. We are now bringing all the medicine to the village, which I do when it snows anyway, and we’re working with the village shops to coordinate online and phone orders.

Everybody is supported, there is not one person in parish who hasn’t go someone to look after them.

I regularly post videos of nature on the village Facebook and share updates. Normally, the lambing barn is open to the village, so I have been trying to share videos with local groups so that the children can still feel involved and close to nature. We also removed our sheep from the nearby fields and did a leaflet drop telling people to go up there, let dogs off the lead and enjoy themselves.
What is the role of farmers to provide food for people now?

The UK imports a lot of food and this could be affected as countries may alter their exports. People are now realising how important our own farmers are in providing healthy and sustainable food, and now that farmers are doing deliveries, people are paying a decent price for good quality product. It’s locally sourced, sustainable, ethically produced and environmentally sensitive.

Focusing on ways in which consumers and support farmers. What do you need from customers and consumers at this point?

Farm diversification businesses have been hit hard. For example, farms that host weddings, glamping and workshops wildlife safaris. Consumers can support farms when they start running these businesses again by re-booking and visiting when it’s safe to do so.

This is a time to support farmers’ great produce, you can buy it online and get it delivered.

What do you need from government?

Support. An understanding and reassurance for the future. We need to see some recognition for what farmers do as key workers producing food, and improved financial support so that we can continue producing food in a sustainable way. We need fair markets and fair price for a good product.

Covid has revealed how important farmers are to our economy and livelihoods. There’s also a huge gap between the consumer and the farmer. The government should be thinking about adding agriculture onto the school syllabus so that people better understand where food comes from.
“I regularly post videos of nature on the village Facebook and share updates. Normally, the lambing barn is open to the village, so I have been trying to share videos with local groups so that the children can still feel involved and close to nature.”

SALLY-ANN SPENCE, ENGLAND
Martin is the U.K. chair of the Nature Friendly Farming Network. He is a third-generation farmer and contractor in South Cambridgeshire, growing mainly arable crops on his family farm and rented land. He has a special interest in farm conservation management, currently running an ELS and HLS agreement and Countryside Stewardship schemes on land he rents. He also supports the delivery of Stewardship Schemes for a number of other farmers.
What can the government do to support farmers during this time?
The government can help British farmers by supporting all food production that lives up to the highest standards and delivers food to consumers with the shortest supply chain possible. It is not a food production problem we are having and that’s leading to food waste but a labour and supply system problem unable to have food available on the shelves for public.

What needs to change in farming policy?
Farming policy needs to change to value both the landscapes and the food that farmers deliver. This will allow farmers to get a fair price for the food they produce and support the management and delivery of a healthy landscape through environmental and climate measures.

How can consumers support farmers during this time?
Consumers can support farmers by buying produce that has come straight off of the farm or from a source that they trust. It is always best if consumers can buy from local stores, online ethical suppliers or, when they are in a supermarket, making sure that they know that the food is produced with the highest animal welfare and environment standards.

What would you like to say to people about the role of UK farms to provide food across the UK?
A farmer’s key role is to produce food from a healthy landscape, and we would love the public to recognise the high standards of food that we can produce in the beautiful British countryside. We would like consumers to value the products, the natural resources, the time and the energy that is put into delivering high quality food.

Why is biodiversity essential to long-term food security?
Healthy soil and a healthy environment are essential to long term food production. If we do not deliver a healthy environment, then the next generation will not have reliable food production. Unless we join up environmental improvements, climate mitigation, biodiversity delivery alongside production of food in the landscape we cannot guarantee the long-term availability of food.

How does nature friendly farming enhance the UK’s long-term food security?
A national shift to nature friendly farming is one of the only ways we can guarantee long-term food production. All the research and statistics show that the health of the landscape is declining. We are currently depleting our natural environment, our water quality, our soil quality and our biodiversity. Farming all around the world is damaging its natural environment and it doesn’t need to. Unless we tackle all of those together and set out to improve our soil health, water quality, biodiversity and high-quality food then we cannot continue to produce food in the landscape for future generations.

How does being a nature friendly farmer make you more resilient?
Being a nature friendly farmer makes you more resilient because we are utilising the productivity potential of the whole landscape. Rather than focusing on one good or service, we are focussed on the best output from the whole landscape and get the best return for all goods and services we can deliver.

How does the public benefit from what you’re doing on the farm?
The public can experience diverse biodiversity and nature when they visit the farm. They can also see, for themselves, that we are farming in a more holistic way, which is healthier for our food and for our landscape.

What’s the value of the NFFN?
The NFFN provides us with opportunity to bring the industry together across the UK, making sure all aspects of farming – organic, commercial, smallholding, crofting – have a voice. There are many of us in the UK trying our best to farm in a way that works for the countryside, but also gives us a decent income and works as a business. The way we produce food in the UK and the rest of the world needs to radically change. The public need to recognise how they can use their purchasing power to support food that has come from the best landscapes producing multiple outputs rather than just focusing on the cheapest price and not having an understanding of the landscape that comes from.
“Being a nature friendly farmer makes you more resilient because you are utilising the productivity potential of the whole landscape”

MARTIN LINES, ENGLAND
Jock Gibson
Livestock Farmer
Edinvale Farm, Scotland

Jock is a livestock farmer in Scotland, who, after inheriting the farm from his father decided to work with nature rather than against it. Jock is currently supporting his local community by adjusting their business model to support local and national deliveries, they are now completing a months’ worth of business in 2 to 3 days. They have also teamed up with other local businesses to deliver on their behalf, helping vulnerable people receive the food and goods that they need.
Tell us why you are a nature friendly farmer?

My Dad was a good farmer and he was starting to see the benefits of working with nature but perhaps slightly reluctant to take the right steps and change the practices on the farm. When I inherited the farm, I had the opportunity to do what I want. For me, working with nature as opposed to against it seems an obvious way to go. We’re not changing overnight, we do have to do it step by step, but the more we can work with nature on the farm the more enjoyable it is and the better a product we produce.

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

We already have wildflower margins on the farm. The biggest change we have made is with our grazing management. This allows us to have better soil health, management and by leaving large proportions of the farm without cattle on it for extended periods of time allows nature to thrive and we’re seeing a wider variety of species come onto the farm – from hare to butterfly species.

We’re trying to minimise how we plough and tillage. We’ve cut fertiliser in half by being clever about how and where we use it. Farmers can be more intelligent with how we use it and by looking at different grass species, we’re hoping we can do away with it altogether.

What benefits in nature have you seen on your farm? Any specific impacts would be really helpful.

By keeping areas out of grazing we’ve seen an increase in the population of oyster catchers on our more marginal grounds and certainly within the grazing areas as opposed to having cattle roam on all the grazing areas, we only have them on one sixth of the area at any given time. So, the animals graze tightly on specific parts of the farm and them moving them around. This allows grass to be left to grow and flora and fauna increases in these areas. Cattle goes back on the areas, but this happens gently. We’re not destroying areas of habitat and we’re not destroying species that are there with cattle. They’re getting the chance to move on, and they’re coexisting with the livestock on the farm.

We have seen a big influx of hares and butterflies are abundant. We are generally seeing more species coming through and generally the population is increasing.

How do nature friendly farming methods make you more resilient to climate change?

We are carbon auditing every year and from the last twelve months, we’ve reduced our CO2 equivalent of dead weight meat by about 40%. This happens by increasing the output from the farm. We’re able to carry more animals per hectare and this greater efficiency allows us to reduce the CO2 per kilo of beef that’s produced.

By not ploughing the ground we’re not releasing carbon into the atmosphere, we’re adding a layer of grass and by giving the grass a rest between grazes we’re allowing the grass to grow its roots, grow more and this means it can absorb more CO2 and lock it further into the ground.

What needs to change in farming policy to support the future of farming?

On the face of it, public money for public good is a good idea, my concern with the current policy is that people will be paid for doing things like putting in hedgerows, wildflower margins or turning land into sallow, but what happens when all that is done? I’m worried that there will be public money to support these things for a finite amount of time.

Where does the incentive come for continuous improvement? What happens to subsidies as a whole? What happens to the cost of food production? What happens to food security if those subsidies go? We need long term, flexible, and measurable farming policy to effectively address these issues.

How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?

Two weeks ago, I was having sleepless nights when people were being told not to eat at restaurants because that was 80% of our business that was going to disappear overnight.

We very quickly managed to realign, and we have been incredibly lucky with the support we have had locally and nationally from people coming and buying from our local shop or ordering online. We are now doing a months’ worth of work every two to three days.

Are you involved in any initiatives that support the local community or people?

We are helping the local community by teaming up with local business who don’t have the same resources as us and making their deliveries for them. We have also been going to the Co-op to collect milk and butter for people that are self-isolating. That way, vulnerable people who can’t leave their homes don’t need to wait for weeks to receive their supermarket orders.

What do you need from consumers?

We need consumers continued support. We want them to know that it is not a hassle to deliver to them. By allowing us to help people, people are helping us in business, and helping us keep our staff employed. I hope that afterwards the support will continue.

What do you need from the government?

Moving forward we need clarity and the truth from the government so that we can continue to make informed decisions.

Farmers and food producers are incredibly grateful for the support that we are receiving at the moment. By supporting local food producers and helping them generate a profit, you are helping them to invest back into their business and do all the things that the general public want farmers to do, like invest in nature.

How can the public benefit from what you’re doing on the farm?

With social distancing and self-isolation, it is difficult for the public to get the most out of our farm. But with tools like social media it is great that we can offer people a glimpse of nature while they are at home.

What do you need from consumers?

We need consumers continued support. We want them to know that it is not a hassle to deliver to them. By allowing us to help people, people are helping us in business, and helping us keep our staff employed. I hope that afterwards the support will continue.
“We need consumers continued support. It is not a hassle to deliver to people and by allowing us to help, they’re keeping local businesses alive.”

JOCK GIBSON, SCOTLAND
Charlie Cole
Goat Kid Farmer
Broughgammon Farm, Northern Ireland

Charlie Cole is a first-generation farmer who manages Broughgammon on the North coast of Antrim. His farm, famous for its award-winning rose veal and goat burgers, has been championing sustainability and the principle of ‘forward thinking farming’ since 2012.

Broughgammon is a mixed system aiming to demonstrate high welfare standards, environmental stewardship, resilience and profitability. Charlie is a passionate advocate for locally produced sustainable food, highlighting that nature friendly farming can play a key role in addressing many of the current problems facing food and farming at present.
How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?

It’s been an absolute nightmare. Our business is completely dependent on us selling directly to the customer. So now that the Government restrictions are in place, the farmers markets and street food events have come to a close and we’ve had to shut the café in the farm shop which are all usually reliable sources of income.

To adapt to the situation, we’ve started a “click and collect” service through the online farm shop which enables customers to buy and collect our produce in Belfast, Dublin and the farm shop. People can also order produce online that can be delivered to their door.

Are you involved in any initiatives that support the local community or people?

When we set up the click and collect service, we introduced a more stock than we usually supply to reduce the burden on local markets. Traditionally we only stocked fresh produce from our farm.

What would you like to say to people at this time about the role of UK farms to protect nature?

This crisis has made it very clear that we have lost the resilience in our food and farming system, with value being placed on “cheap”. This has led to degraded soils, diminishing wildlife and imports of lower food safety and farming standards. We need to shift to a more sustainable, mixed farming system for resilience across the board. Farms that use sustainable methods provide not just for human needs, but also for nature.

How should we use this opportunity to buy British and support British farmers?

Localised supply chains are far more robust and resilient than those of the supermarket that involve importing food from abroad. We should use this opportunity to seek out small, local independent businesses and give them the support they need to survive. A localised economy benefits all, not just the retailer.

How can the public benefit from what you’re doing on the farm?

Our business is intrinsically linked to the local economy and community. We’re completely committed to reinvesting back into the localised supply chain and improving nature so that others can enjoy it. The more the public source our high-quality meat and vegetables, the more we can reinvest and the bigger the impact we can have.

What do you need from consumers?

Covid is impacting the whole supply chain – from farm to fork. We need consumers to buy locally from farmers that are working hard provide for the country. Covid’s arrival has created unprecedented disruption to farmers, and they desperately need consumer’s help to keep their businesses alive.

What do you need from the government?

We are trying to adapt to the current situation, by offering a click and collect service, but our cash flows have been badly damaged. We’re only a small farming business so margins were already tight and we’re really struggling. ANY business support that the Government can provide would be extremely valuable.

What needs to change in farming policy to support the future of farming?

Food is greatly undervalued, in order for environmentally friendly food to be even vaguely obtainable it will need support from Westminster. We also need a huge shift in the structure of the supply chain and the way that people value their food.

As for nature, it’s the very essence of our survival/being and it needs to be supported by the Government and held with the utmost regard.

How do nature friendly farming methods make you more resilient to climate change?

Farming in a nature-friendly way increases our resilience to varying farm costs, extreme weather events and more. We’re also increasing diversity, which is good because not all of our eggs are in one basket.

Why is the NFFN important?

The NFFN not only acts as a discussion group, allowing fellow farmers to share best practice, but more importantly it allows us to lobby for environmentally friendly policies that can deliver a more diverse and resilient farm and food chain for the future.
“The current crisis provides people with time to reflect on the importance of food and farming to all humanity. Our food can only be sustainable and bountiful if it’s produced in harmony with the environment and wildlife.”

CHARLIE COLE, NORTHERN IRELAND
Organic Livestock
Cottage Farm, Jacobstow
North Cornwall

Cottage Farm is an organic regenerative livestock farm powered by renewable energy. Paul raises organic Red Ruby/North Devon cattle and organic Wiltshire Horn sheep, which they sell as meat boxes direct to customers, both locally and nationally. Paul also runs the North Cornwall Food Hub which supplies food and other products produced mostly by local farmers, growers and producers.
Tell us why you are a nature friendly farmer?

Because farming with nature rather than against nature is easier, healthier, cheaper and more satisfying than so-called conventional farming.

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

We do a lot on our farm to work with nature. We farm old native cattle breeds that do well in local conditions and the mob grazing simulates movements similar to that of wild herds. A variety of trees, bushes and plants are encouraged on the farm, increasing the diversity of the hedge for nature and self-medication for stock.

The ley is managed with a wide mixture of deep-rooted pasture plants, including cocksfoot, meadow fescue, tall fescue, foxtail, and many herbs - 34 varieties at last count. Our hedges are cut at most every 3 years and only when necessary. The trees and bushes generate a real variety of food for the birds, which has led to the arrival of new species of butterflies and birds.

We are powered almost entirely by renewable energy, as we have a wind turbine, PV panels and solar-thermal tubes. We also use home-made biodiesel derived from used cooking oil for tractor, cars and deliveries of our produce and Food Hub orders.

What benefits in nature have you seen on your farm? Any specific impacts would be really helpful.

Mob grazing results in minimal weed plants remaining in fields and wildflowers have more time to regrow to a reasonable size without being continually set back by grazing, which promotes root development and thus resistance to adverse conditions. These deep-rooted plants reduce the impacts of both flooding and drought. I always say multiculture is better than monoculture!

Nature-friendly hedge management creates wildlife corridors and provides nesting habitats for farmland birds. The trees and bushes generate a real variety of food for the birds, which has led to the arrival of new species of butterflies and birds.

Our organic matter content has grown from 3% to 8% in 15 years, i.e. some 0.3% per year, further improving growing conditions.

How do nature friendly farming methods make you more resilient to climate change?

The farm’s pasture is much less vulnerable to extreme weather events, such as flooding and droughts. We are also not dependent of suppliers of feed, chemicals, vets, wholesalers or supermarkets and external energy suppliers, which makes us more resilient.

How does nature friendly farming make your business more financially viable?

Farming with nature reduces our outgoings and we have no bills for water, electricity, heat, or fuels. By selling direct to the public we maximise our income and diversify our income from a few wholesalers to many customers.

How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?

Our turnover has increased by about 500% in our Food Hub. We can hardly keep up and may have to limit the total number of orders. However, it’s positive to see that people are supporting local and sustainable farmers during a pandemic and I hope to see this continue.

What would you like to say to people at this time about the role of UK farms to protect nature?

Buy local and organic produce. By buying your food from sustainable farms that you trust, you can guarantee your money is supporting the continued positive effect these farms have on the environment, such as improving wildlife habitats and addressing climate change.

What would you like to say to people at this time about the role of UK farms to provide food for people in the UK?

We should be importing food as little as possible. When we do import produce, this should only be for food that cannot be grown or produced in the UK and the environmental and welfare standards must not undercut those that British farmers work hard to keep.

How should we use this opportunity to buy British and support British farmers?

The coronavirus shows us that most imports are unnecessary, and the act of importation is destructive. It may be desirable to import some foods from hotter countries, but why import vegetables, meat or flowers from countries with much the same climate as ours and lower welfare standards?

What do you need from consumers?

Now that we are experienced people supporting local producers and short supply chains, we are hoping that they do not switch back to supermarkets when the COVID crisis is over. The recent shift in behaviour is extremely positive for British farmers and the environment.

What do you need from the government?

We need tariffs on imports of foods that British farmers can produce, bans on imports from countries with lower welfare standards, and we need a pathway to rapidly transition all energy to renewables.
“By buying your food from sustainable farms that you trust, you can guarantee your money is supporting the continued positive effect these farms have on the environment, such as improving wildlife habitats and addressing climate change”

PAUL SOUSEK, ENGLAND
Neil was born and brought up at Hill Top Farm, Malham in North Yorkshire, where he now farms with his partner Leigh. In 2003, as part of a conservation grazing scheme, Neil re-introduced 20 Belted Galloway cattle to join the Swaledale sheep flock. This proved to be a defining time in terms of farm ethos and mind-set, as he sought more sustainable and environmentally friendly production methods.
How has the Coronavirus pandemic impacted your business and distribution?

As livestock farmers we are fortunate that the coronavirus has come at a time of year which is not based on livestock sales. We consider ourselves to be very lucky. However, our wholesalers, that usually distribute our produce to restaurants, have had to completely transform their business model to deliver to people living at home.

Are you involved in any initiatives that support the local community or people?

Our local village has lots of people who are self-isolating because they are either elderly or high risk. We take part in community scale zoom calls to help people still feel connected. Collectively we make sure that people are getting the supplies they need and organise things to be dropped at people’s doorsteps. It is incredible to see the community pulling together during a time like this.

What would you like to say to people at this time about the role of UK farms to provide food for people in the UK?

We are currently seeing people rely much more heavily on UK farmers to provide them with high quality, nutritious food. The coronavirus pandemic has completely changed how people are thinking about food. They want to source food which they can trust, that is reliable and nourishing.

It is important now more than ever that the public supports British farmers so that we can create a robust, reliable, sustainable food supply chain that can support the population during uncertain times like these.

Our challenge, as a farming community that cares about nature, is to work out how to put systems in place over the next few months that are robust enough to withstand the likely transition of consumers reverting back to large scale supermarket shopping.

How should we use this opportunity to buy British and support British farmers?

It’s important that people support British farmers but it’s also important that they take it a step further and are discerning about the food they buy.

I would like for consumers to take this opportunity to look at the food that they are eating, think about where it came from and how it was produced and what impact it is having.

How can the public benefit from what you’re doing on the farm?

While people are self-isolating, we are sharing as much as we can across social media. We want people to still feel connected to nature even if they have to stay at home. We want to show them that spring is coming, nature is thriving, farming is still happening. We are all in a tough situation right now, but we can get through this together, there is hope.

What do you need from consumers?

We have seen a rise in consumers buying locally produced food because of the strain that large supermarkets have been under. Long-term, we need consumers to get out of the mindset and reinforced habit of rushing down to their supermarket to buy all of their food. We need them to look much more closely at the food they are eating, how it is produced and how far it has travelled to get to them.

More importantly we need to change our habits on food wastage. We can’t afford to waste food, especially during a crisis. The amount of food wasted at each stage of the supply chain is shocking and by shortening the chain we will be able to limit the amount of food that is wasted.

What do you need from the government?

Before the coronavirus government policy was moving in the right direction. It was setting out a net zero farming system that works in harmony with the environment and protects wildlife. It’s important we don’t lose sight of this because we were making good progress.

The government needs to ensure that we stay on course and don’t revert back to food system that believes in production at any cost. Protecting our soils, water and biodiversity is essential to ensuring long term, stable, food production.

What needs to change in farming policy?

Farm policy needs to stay on the trajectory we are headed on. It was not only a positive move but also one that needed to happen. I don’t want what’s happening currently to completely derail the progress that was being made.

How does being a nature friendly farmer make you more resilient to climate change?

I know that within my own business, environmentally, economically and socially nature friendly farming has made us more resilient.

Why is the NFFN an important organisation?

The NFFN is important because it is spreading a vital message. There is a better system out there. There is a way to feed the country and protect nature simultaneously. It is a message which is more important now than ever.

What nature friendly farming approaches have you implemented on your farm?

We have reduced our overall stocking density. Fourteen years ago we had 800 sheep. We have reduced this and also brought in cattle. We now have a breeding herd of 30 cattle and 190 sheep. The farm averages 120 cattle and 300 sheep on farm at any time, over an area of 1,100 acres.

We now manage the land for wildlife and biodiversity. For example, we mow our meadows much later in the year. They are now cut in mid-July at the earliest, which means they have a minimum 10-week period in the summer without grazing. This creates a habitat for ground nesting birds and allows plants to flower and release their seeds.

What impact has this had?

By reducing the stocking rate, switching to cattle grazing and changing the times of grazing, we have changed the environment dramatically. Botanically, it is very different. A lot of plants have returned, including rock rose, birds eye primrose, scabious, wild thyme, spearmint, bluebells. We never used to see these species.

We never used to have barn owls, now the RSBP ring chicks every year. I used to see a hare about once a year, now see a hare one in three days. There are also more skylarks, redshanks and curlews.

Reduced stocking density has had a positive impact on our profits. Overall output has decreased, income from agriculture has decreased, but we have become more profitable. This is because the costs of production are so much less. Fewer sheep means we don’t need to buy in concentrates or feeds. We don’t need extra people to help on the farm. We turned this farm from a loss-making to a profit-making enterprise.

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NEIL HESLTINE, ENGLAND
Find out how you can support Nature Friendly Farmers across the UK

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