

## Role of the NFU

(paper supporting the blog TB, Badgers and Cattle in The UK: A Campaign Ripe For A Re-boot, at <http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org>)

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### Introduction

It's important to realise that the National Farmers Union does not represent all farmers. Unfortunately it is routinely used to represent all farmers or 'farming', by the media and governments, not least because that makes life easier. So by default the NFU does *effectively* represent all farmers in the UK, whether they like it or not. Of course the NFU profiles itself that way: its slogan is "the Voice of British Farming". [It's officially the NFU of England and Wales although there is also a separate Welsh organisation, the Farmers Union of Wales].

I admit I have a history with the NFU, having been a countryside (nature) campaigner and a pesticides campaigner for Friends of the Earth in the 1980s. I crossed swords with them many times and in those days many of those in the NFU were upfront about 'efficiency' and 'productivity' being more important than environmental protection.

Since then the NFU rhetoric has moved with the times as public concerns have grown over the health downsides of intensive farming and food production, over treatment of the land, and over destruction of nature but mostly in the way that a sheet anchor or drogue follows a ship at sea: slowing it down. The NFU still reliably opposes almost every health or environmental reform to the way farming works. It's even been lobbying for the reintroduction of neonicotinoid 'bee-killer' pesticides for instance, and it's been a vehement supporter of badger culling.

In 2019 when a Derbyshire cull was halted by Defra in a controversy over its possible impact on badger vaccination the Farmers Guardian reported that the NFU vowed to "leave no stone unturned" in its efforts to overturn the decision. The NFU ultimately failed on that count although the rest of the cull went ahead.

The NFU plays badger culling as an iconic power-play. NFU Vice President Stuart Roberts said: "In just six years, our industry has gone from feeling powerless to control this devastating disease to having more than 30 areas licensed to carry out badger culls".

On many issues not all farmers agree with the NFU. There have been several attempts to start rival farmers' organisations to the NFU (such as the Small Farms Association and the Tenant Farmers Association), while the Farming Community Network runs the annual The Oxford Real Farming Conference as an alternative to the establishment Oxford Farming Conference. It was 'started in 2010 by Colin Tudge and Ruth West (founders of the Campaign for Real Farming) and agricultural writer, Graham Harvey, to highlight the

alternatives to conventional farming’. But compared to the NFU these initiatives have had little political influence on government policy for English farming.

Many farmers will privately admit they are part of the NFU mainly because of benefits with NFU Mutual, the insurance company, or help with broadband. On a similar basis, many surfers are members of the National Trust, to avoid paying high car park fees. Despite its name which makes it sound like a trade union or movement, the NFU is a trade body, in a similar way to the Horticultural Trades Association which represents the plant trade. Such bodies usually proceed at the pace of the ‘slowest ship in the convoy’. In the NFU’s case that also means most representing agribusiness.


The NFU however is effectively built-in to the English government system, with access and influence networks not rivalled by any other lobby group. Government Ministers, particularly but not only in the Conservative Party, are more likely to be willing to oppose banks or manufacturers than they are to take on the NFU. (Which is why Michael Gove’s proposed reforms to farming were such a radical departure when he announced them in 2018, and why the NFU will be working hard to undo them).

**Big farmers to see funding cut post-Brexit after Gove shakeup**

Payments under EU’s CAP will be replaced by subsidies based on environmental protections

Fiona Harvey Environment correspondent  
Wed 12 Sep 2018 00:01 BST

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▲ The environment secretary, Michael Gove, praised the agriculture bill, saying that farmers who look after their land will be rewarded. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/LNP/Rex/Shutterstock

The UK’s biggest landowners will see the payments they receive from the public purse fall sharply from 2021 in what would be the biggest shake-up of farming for decades.

From 2021, a new system rewarding farmers for the public goods they provide will be phased in until 2027 when the last payments based on the amount of land farmed will be made. In place of the £3bn a year farmers currently receive under the EU’s common agricultural policy (CAP), farmers will be expected to sign environmental land management contracts detailing their commitments to protecting habitats, improving flood management and enhancing air and water quality.

*From The Guardian – Gove takes on the agricultural establishment in 2018*

In 2017 Rob Harrison of *Ethical Consumer* magazine, perhaps perceived an organ of the urban ‘far left’ so far as the NFU is concerned, wrote:

*‘Soon after Ethical Consumer began campaigning against the badger cull, it became clear how central the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) was to pushing the current cull forward. One of the striking things about the NFU is the degree to which it appears unconcerned about either scientific evidence or the opinions of the general public.*

*Modern consumer-facing businesses, like most UK supermarkets and indeed many industry bodies, at least pretend to care about environmental and social issues. Not so the NFU, which appears to view the general public with disdain. We wanted to try to understand why this was, and so began researching it in 2015’.*

*‘The National Farmers’ Union of England and Wales is a registered employers’ association for the farming industry. The NFU appears not to be widely known or understood, particularly outside of rural areas.*

*It has a long history and for a large part of this time its work was uncontentious and widely respected. However, as food production has globalised and the environmental movement has grown, consensus about how our food should be produced has broken down. Over the last 20 years, for environmental campaigners particularly, the NFU has developed a reputation of having hardened into an anti-environmental, free-market lobby group’.*

*‘The primary goal of our research was to understand the NFU and how this organisation has changed and why. This has not always been easy since much of what the NFU stands for appears baffling on the surface. Why would farmers, for example, want to oppose soil-erosion standards when this would appear to undermine their long-term future?*

*The mists begin to clear with the realisation that its name is where the seeds of many misunderstandings first begin to germinate. This is because, as we go on to argue, the National Farmers’ Union is not really national, not really farmers and not really a union. It is easier to understand it if we think of it, perhaps, as the ‘English, agribusiness lobby-group’.*

Ethical Consumer produced a report ([here](#)), which the NFU [described](#) as out of date and ‘riddled with inaccuracies’. The report criticised NFU policies and lobbying over environmental issues such as bees and pesticides, soil erosion, air pollution, biodiversity and meadows, sustainability in the context of the EU CAP, climate change and flooding. It also detailed criticisms on mega-farms and animal welfare, badgers and TB, and the minimal-standard ‘Red Tractor’ label scheme. It also accused the NFU of ‘passing on the costs to the rest of us’ over support for GM crops, organophosphate in sheep dips, opposing road safety regulations, and workers rights, because of opposition to the Agricultural Wages Board.

Harrison also pointed out that ‘the NFU chooses not to disclose who its corporate members are’ and questioned the NFU’s relationship with pesticide and GM companies.

The Ethical Consumer view of the NFU not surprisingly echoed that arrived at by badger gladiator in chief, Dominic Dyer of the Badger Trust, who is himself a defector from the agricultural establishment. [He wrote](#) in 2016 that rather than being the voice of Britain’s farmers, the NFU is ‘the voice of modern intensive agriculture’ ... ‘where production and profits are the most important issues’.

Dyer said: ‘you begin to understand the clout the NFU has with Defra’s civil servants and politicians’ ... ‘when you consider these figures’:

*‘the UK has over 142,000 farm businesses, which is more than the number of companies involved in the motor trade, education, finance and insurance. These farming businesses are the cornerstone of UK food and drink, which is valued at 16% of total UK manufacturing turnover. Sales of UK food and drink were £28 billion – with exports of £12.8 billion – in 2014, according to the Food and Drink Federation. When combined with farming, the sector employs 3.8 million people’.*

Dyer noted that:

*‘in the post war period, the relationship with MAFF [Ministry of Agriculture Food and Fisheries] was reinforced by the 1947 Agriculture Act which effectively set in law the involvement of the NFU in all key aspects of agricultural policy including agricultural subsidise paid to farmers. For the next 65 years the NFU continued to grow in power and influence ... In many ways the NFU acts as a government agency when it comes to agriculture and farming policy. Its officials are regularly consulted on policy issues and regularly work with civil servants on sensitive issues’.*

*‘... Today Defra is not a department of State to protect the environment. Just like its predecessor Maff it has become an arm of government to protect business from the environment’.*

That’s what political scientists call ‘clientelism’: when power and policy in a part of government is effectively captured by a ‘client’ business interest. As an example Dyer points to the dairy industry, and milk priced cheaper than bottled water. He fingers the abolition of the state-controlled MMB, Milk Marketing Board in 1994, which was ‘welcomed’ by the NFU as the origins of a crisis in the industry, leading to many smaller family farms going out of business and expansion of larger intensive farms, with negative welfare effects. Dyer concluded: ‘All these factors put cattle at risk of increased spread of bovine TB’ and ‘With an ever increasing reliance on exports for the British livestock and dairy industry, the NFU lives in constant fear of the doors to key markets like China closing as a result of a food safety ban on products from TB vaccinated cattle’.

The close relationship between the NFU and the government is illustrated by what happened when in 2013 pro-badger activists organised ‘Wounded Badger Patrols’ to monitor the free-shooting culls sanctioned by the government. [Dyer states](#) that:

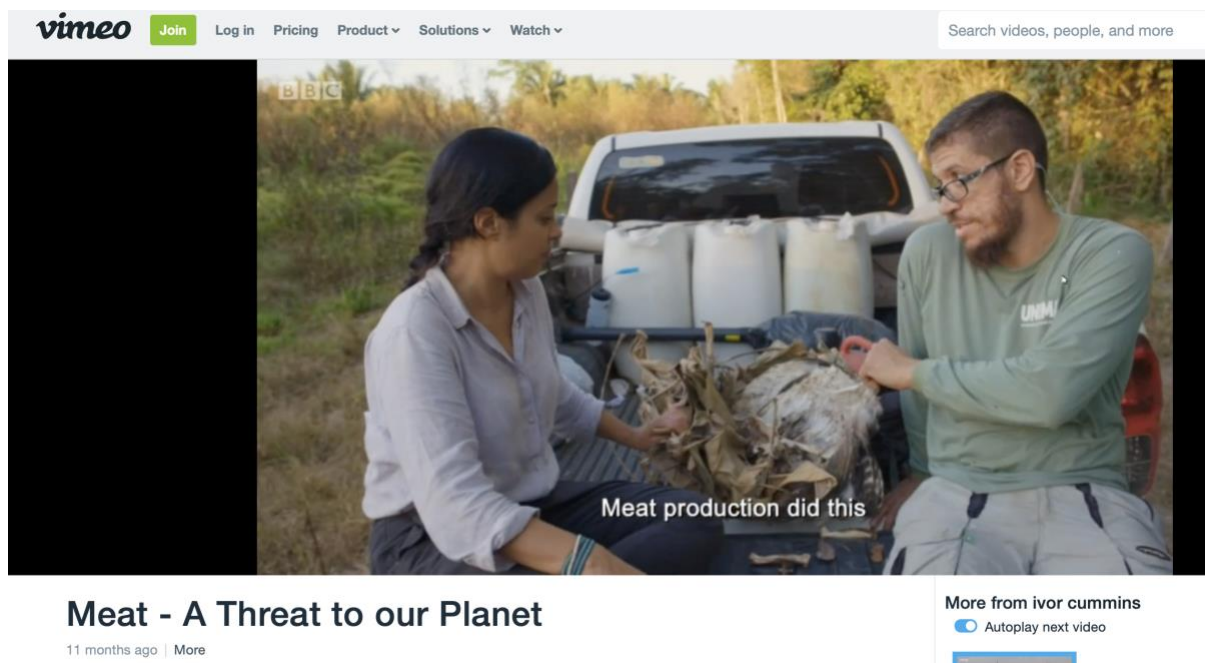
*‘reacting to the fears planted by the National Farmers Union over threats and intimidation to their members participating in the cull, the police brought in a huge number of officers and equipment into the culling zones in 2103.*

*The NFU placed officials in the police control rooms and played a hands-on role. A police officer filmed in Gloucestershire in 2013 told an anti badger cull protestor that his details*

would be passed on to the NFU, which the officer said might chose to pursue a private prosecution and this video was shown on The Guardian website’.

Dyer says that after this was raised in Parliament and the Police Commissioner for Somerset and Gloucestershire expressed concerns, the practice of allowing the NFU and cull contractors automatic access to police control rooms was changed. Dyer records a litany of other incidents in his book *Badgered to Death*.

There’s no reason to think that the NFU’s influence as a champion of intensive livestock farming is in any way diminished today. In October 2020 the NFU [got the BBC to pull](#) a documentary from i-Player: *Meat - A Threat to Our Planet?* introduced by Liz Bonnin. In the words of *Farmers Weekly*, this film ‘set out to explore the assertion that consumers’ desire to eat meat is killing the planet’.



**Meat - A Threat to our Planet**  
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A researcher shows the remains of a starved Harpy Eagle chick to BBC Presenter Liz Bonnin.

You can still watch *Meat: A Threat To Our Planet?* [on Vimeo](#)