



## *Raising a Voice for High Nature Value Farmers*

Agriculture Minister  
Michelle O'Neil MLA  
DARD Private Office  
Room 438  
Dundonald House  
Ballymiscaw  
Belfast  
BT4 3SB

31 May 2013

Dear Minister,

### **High Nature Value farming – an urgent call for action**

We are writing to ask you to take action now to save High Nature Value farming. Across much of the UK, especially in the uplands and marginal areas, many of our most iconic landscapes and wildlife are sustained by High Nature Value farming systems which deliver a range of public goods, alongside high quality food production. Despite providing a host of benefits for society, these special farming systems are economically vulnerable because the market fails to pay for those benefits, and without a better package of public support, the future of High Nature Value farming in Northern Ireland hangs in the balance.

As you make decisions about the future of farming including Common Agricultural Policy implementation, our coalition of farming and conservation organisations is calling on the UK Government and Devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to do more to secure the future of these exceptionally valuable systems, before it is too late.

We believe there are steps that need to be taken to create a more positive outlook for High Nature Value farming systems:

- **Through the Common Agricultural Policy ensure that High Nature Value farmers are properly rewarded for supporting our most precious wildlife and landscapes.**
- **Prioritise spending on targeted Rural Development Programmes across the UK.**

John Martin  
Secretariat on behalf of the High  
Nature Value Farming Coalition  
c/o RSPB NI HQ  
Belvoir Park Forest  
Belfast  
BT8 7QT

- **Make progress in identifying and monitoring High Nature Value farming systems.**
- **Invest in research on High Nature Value farming systems across the UK, including an assessment of the broad benefits they provide for society and the threats they face.**

These measures would place environment-friendly farming businesses at the heart of a green rural renaissance, as well as providing demonstrable benefits to local communities and economies.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this further with you either in Stormont, or we could arrange a site visit to a High Nature Value farm. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

John Martin  
 Secretariat on behalf of the High Nature Value Farming Coalition

This letter is supported by the following organisations:



**National  
 Trust  
 for  
 Northern Ireland**





Mike Edwards



Andy Hay



Chris Gomersall

## *Raising a Voice for High Nature Value Farmers*

### High Nature Value farming – an urgent call for action

**This call for action is supported by: Scottish Crofters Federation, South West Uplands Federation, National Centre for the Uplands, Foundation for Common Land, Federation of Cumbria Commoners, National Parks England, The National Association for AONBs, RSPB, Buglife, Plantlife, European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism (EFNCP), Butterfly Conservation, The Wildlife Trusts, Ulster Wildlife Trust, Scottish Wildlife Trust, National Trust for NI, National Trust for Scotland, Archaeology Scotland**

Most types of farms in the UK can, if managed sympathetically, provide a home for nature alongside food production. But some, low-intensity farming systems are particularly valuable for wildlife and can also deliver a host of wider benefits including carbon storage, the protection of water resources, and a wealth of landscape and cultural heritage. These High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems are predominantly grazing livestock farms in hill and upland areas, where climatic factors, land quality and distance from markets makes farming particularly difficult. Lowland farms, managed at a low intensity, can also deliver a patchwork of habitats and farmland features which provide important refuges for wildlife.

HNV farms are economically vulnerable and the farmers, crofters and rural communities that depend on them often struggle to make a living. The future of HNV farming in the UK hangs in the balance; without a better package of financial support, their future is under threat, along with that of the incredible wildlife they sustain. Our coalition of organisations calls for action now to prevent the loss of HNV farming.

#### **Action the UK Government and Devolved Administrations must do now to save High Nature Value (HNV) farming:**

- **Through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) ensure that High Nature Value (HNV) farmers are properly rewarded for supporting our most precious wildlife and landscapes.** Across the UK, there are thousands of farming businesses that contribute hugely to supporting our best natural assets, but these are failed by current CAP approaches.
- **Prioritise spending on targeted Rural Development Programmes across the UK** that support the farming systems most important for wildlife and secure viable incomes for HNV farmers to enable them to deliver for society and the environment.
- **Make progress in identifying and monitoring HNV systems** – this is a priority of the European Commission and a requirement for all Member States. In the UK, the Scottish Government has already made considerable progress in developing a HNV farming indicator; England, Wales and Northern Ireland must now follow suit and make this a policy priority, ensuring farmers are engaged in the process.
- **Invest in research on HNV farming systems across the UK, including an assessment of the broad benefits they provide for society and the threats they face.** The ‘sustainable intensification’ approach to

farming fails to recognise the important environmental, cultural and economic benefits that these more extensive farming systems can provide.

## Background

### What is High Nature Value farming?

HNV farming describes low-intensity farming systems which are particularly valuable for wildlife and the natural environment. The UK has approved EU level requirements for all Member States to identify, monitor and support their existing HNV farming systems (Regulation 1698/2005 establishing EAFRD).

In a UK context, HNV farming can mainly be associated with extensive beef and sheep farming in the uplands and marginal farming areas, because of its high reliance on semi-natural vegetation (*vegetation comprised of native plants and maintained by grazing and/or mowing which has not been agriculturally 'improved'*) and unimproved pastures for grazing. However there are also examples from the lowlands which include some low input arable/mixed farming systems and coastal habitats which contain a mosaic of semi natural features which support a rich assemblage of wildlife.

HNV farming relies upon the sympathetic land management practices of farmers – such as grazing with low stocking rates, the traditional mowing of hay meadows, leaving fallow areas, cutting rush or undertaking habitat restoration – all vital for maintaining many of our priority habitats and ensuring the survival of our most threatened wildlife species.

### What are the threats to HNV farming?

The message is simple! Although large amounts of public money are spent on the CAP, most of this is not targeted to the farms that deliver the most for society. As the benefits HNV farms provide are mostly unrewarded, many of these farms are struggling to survive. Existing support mechanisms such as agri-environment have helped to slow the loss of these systems, but are typically insufficient to make HNV farms commercially viable. Market forces and social pressures are leaving farmers with a stark choice between intensifying, abandoning parts of their farms and in some cases ceasing to farm altogether, all of which will have disastrous consequences for wildlife dependent upon these systems and the survival of these rural communities.

### What needs to change?

HNV farming systems provide vital services and are of cultural importance, but they receive inadequate public support and many are threatened. Although EU Member States are required to identify, support and monitor their HNV farming systems, so far, little progress has been made. We are calling on the UK Government and Devolved Administrations to do more to secure the future of these existing systems which are of the highest environmental value before it is too late.