

## Why we should invest in Scottish farmers rather than ‘support’ them

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*By Sofie Brøgger*

*Sustainable Development & International Relations student at the University of St Andrews*

Land use in Scotland is responsible for about 50% of national GHG emissions and it is a key driver of biodiversity loss. The farming, fishery and forestry industries therefore have central roles to play in regenerating Scottish landscapes and reducing emissions. At the same time, these industries both shape and enable life in the countryside, and Scottish land and the industries that depend on it produce essential goods and services for our health and wellbeing, the environment and the economy. A transition to a low-carbon rural economy is therefore both a difficult challenge and a sensitive topic.

At the recent ‘F5: Future, Food, Farming, Fishery & Forestry’ conference taking place at the Moredun Institute in Edinburgh on March 16th 2023, this was however the central topic of discussions between farmers, land-owners, government officials, conservationists, students and many other participants who contributed actively during the day. The diversity of the representatives enabled critical discussions and highlighted the importance of cross-sector communication and collaboration in developing new policies such as the upcoming Agriculture Bill. One farmer spoke passionately about the importance of language and why we should change the way we speak about the resources dedicated towards the agricultural sector:

**“I think strongly that the word ‘support’ should be changed to the word ‘investment’. The government wants us to be able to produce cheap food, help plant trees, sequester carbon, support flood management etc. Investments should be made into our businesses and the land to be able to provide these services.”**

- Lawrence Martin, Farm Manager at [Carbeth Home Farm](#)

These many services farmers are expected to perform and contribute with today represent a shift in the agricultural sector where environmental and sustainability agendas have a growing role. On the train on my way back to Fife, I read [a post on Instagram](#) from a local farmer. The image was of a typewritten letter from the Prime Minister in 1917 which was sent out to farmers across the UK during World War I. The letter called on farmers to help feed the nation, and as the caption of this post so accurately put it, the ask of farmers today is quite different:

**“Now we are, quite rightly, being asked to farm for the environment, save our planet. From an outsider’s point of view, it may seem that many of us are still getting it wrong. However, we are changing, learning and improving. You see, it was relatively straightforward to plough up grassland and plant potatoes and cereals. What isn’t easy is to relearn knowledge that is almost lost. As farmers we only get 30-40 years (if we are**

**lucky) to farm. That's just 30 times to sow a field, 30 times to harvest a crop, 30 times to improve lambing.**”

- Nikki Storrar, [Ardross Farm](#)

We therefore need to invest in our farmers now so they have the knowledge, skills and equipment to produce more sustainable crops without compromising on health, quality and yield. In doing so, it is as important to address and educate consumers on where their money is going and on the true cost of a product. In 2020/21, UK households spent less than 15% of their total expenditure on food. This is among the lowest rates in the world, and it shows that we have become accustomed to artificially low food prices driven by subsidy schemes. However, while many of us can afford to pay a bit more for food, this is not the case for everyone. Food insecurity remains a significant challenge across the UK, and exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, it is difficult for many households to put food on the table. The sustainability of Scottish food systems therefore needs to be addressed in this context.

While the future of farming and land use seems to present us with an unending stream of so-called ‘wicked’ problems and many unanswered questions, there are, thankfully, a lot of solutions out there too. Community-supported agriculture could provide more visibility and opportunities for consumers to engage directly with farmers and gain a better understanding of production processes, and increased collaboration among producers could make local food systems more resilient. These and many other solutions were discussed with enthusiasm at the F5 conference and it is imperative to continue to bring relevant stakeholders together in the same room. But, let’s not forget that it all comes down to the land’s ability to support our needs, and this begins with investing in Scottish farmers.