

Wilder farming and ensuring food security

Sir, Ben Goldsmith ("Wilder farming is the best thing for our countryside", *Thunderer*, Jan 27) has overlooked the thousands of acres of wildflowers that farmers plant to provide homes for bees and the 255,000 miles of hedgerows on farms that provide habitat for wildlife. Farmers are passionate about the environment. It's no accident that farmers spotted more than 112,000 birds from the Red List of Conservation Concern on their land last year — hardly a nature-depleted countryside.

Our farmed landscape is valued by the nation and tourists alike. One need only ask the public: more than four billion visits to the British countryside are made each year.

Without farmers, particularly those in the uplands, we would not have these cherished landscapes or the climate-friendly food that they produce. The government must focus on food security and environmental policies together, rather than adopting a binary approach that would risk undermining the social fabric of rural communities. Do we want to follow a model that puts farmers out of business and simply results in more imports of food from countries produced to standards that would be

illegal here? I don't, and I don't believe the British public do either.
Minette Batters
President, National Farmers' Union

Sir, Ben Goldsmith suggests that wilder farming is the best thing for our countryside. He is probably right in saying that the Environmental Land Management scheme could well represent a good way forward — as long as productive land is protected to ensure our food security. He states that when it comes to food security the real issue is the 250,000 acres of our most productive land that is used to grow bioenergy crops. This is a good point. However, the thousands of acres being lost to inefficient solar farms represent a much more serious threat to our food supplies. The government needs to take this issue seriously and introduce stricter regulatory powers to protect productive farmland.

Professor Mike Alder
Chairman, Solar Campaign Alliance

Sir, I am as excited as Ben Goldsmith by the idea of paying farmers to be nature-friendly. He is right that we need urgent action to tackle the depletion of nature. I hope the new schemes will be given adequate

resources and that enough attention will be paid to their implementation. I do wonder, though, how our nature-friendly farmers are expected to compete commercially with food imports produced to very different environmental standards in countries such as Australia and, potentially, the US. Like it or not, consumer choice in the UK is — at least for the moment — driven by price. Our trade policy risks ruining exactly the type of farmer that Goldsmith wants to encourage.

Nick Mann
Founder, Habitat Aid

Sir, On the threats to food security, Ben Goldsmith overlooks the poor market conditions for the growing of crops and raising of livestock that are exemplified by supermarkets' unfair buying practices. It is not just the land lost to rewilding projects that threatens farmers' livelihoods but the lack of direction in the 2020 Agriculture Act to make sustainable food production economically viable. A more nuanced approach, where farming and nature are both made a priority, would help to erase the belief that "wild farming" is simply a preserve of the wealthy.

Andrew Copeman
London SW11