



National Sheep Association

NSA policy position on Brexit

With the UK's impending departure from the European Union, there are opportunities to exploit and threats to guard against. The immediate dangers to guard against are related to trade, and there have the potential to be catastrophic for the sheep sector. However, on the other hand, the opportunities created by a new Agriculture Bill, tailored to the needs of the UK, cannot be underestimated.

NSA believes we must be proactive against the threats and grasp the opportunities with the aim of creating a new future for agriculture in the UK – one that values the role of quality food production and domestic supply chains; values efficiency, productivity, and resource/climate friendly farming; and integrates our productive farming activities with a host of beneficial by products that society has long benefitted from, such as landscape, environments, wellbeing, culture and rural economies.

The NSA considers that successful agriculture – food production and land management – should be accepted as being a core fundamental need of any nation.

Markets and trade: Imports and exports

- With more than one third of UK lamb exported, the sheep sector relies heavily on a successful, vibrant export trade. Therefore, the sheep industry is a vulnerable sector and lamb should be considered a priority in all trade negotiations.
- The UK needs continued, tariff-free access to EU markets and to the French market in particular.
- There needs to be a realistic transition period of access to the EU Single Market while new trade agreements are discussed.
- Access to more non-EU markets is important, but free trade deals should be examined with extreme caution. Open agreements with countries such as New Zealand and Australia would be damaging to the UK sheep sector without a form of market leveller to cover the different production costs in these countries
- The UK sheepmeat market must be protected in trade agreements with countries that do not compete on a level playing field for production, sheep health and welfare and agri-environmental standards, as well as socio economic factors and farm support structures.



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National Sheep Association is an organisation which represents the views and interests of sheep producers throughout the UK.
NSA is funded by its membership of sheep farmers and its activities involve it in every aspect of the sheep industry.

your business your future

- The UK Government must invest in trade negotiations and development. NSA suggests the creation of a red meat trade development group as a matter of urgency. This would include Government departments, levy bodies and industry stakeholder groups.

Markets and trade: Domestic markets

- Development of the domestic market for UK sheepmeat is essential. Domestic consumption has fallen by nearly two thirds since 1990 (7.5kg per person per year down to 1.9kg). The price has almost doubled in the same time. Work must be done to encourage younger domestic consumers to appreciate lamb as a tasty, tender and nutritious food choice with a low environmental footprint and high animal welfare standards.
- More ambitious targets should be set to see the UK move towards being self-sufficient in lamb. This could be achieved through sheep farming systems and product development.
- Current regional PGI and PDO brands must be protected and promoted.
- While respecting that agricultural powers are devolved, borders between the four UK nations must remain open and steps be taken to ensure all operate on a level playing field for production, sheep health, welfare, agri-environmental standards and rural development.
- UK levy bodies should collaborate as much as possible, particularly across promotional activities and new market developments in domestic and overseas markets.

Rural funding

- Financial support for UK sheep farmers must, at a minimum, be maintained to reflect the hugely important role farm businesses play in the provision of public goods.
- An effective, smooth and suitable length of transition period must be ensured when moving from the current EU scheme to its post-Brexit successor. Funding should be promised for a fixed number of years, regardless of any change of Government in the meantime.
- NSA supports the principle of incentivising good farming practices while delivering a public service – but strongly believes the provision of affordable, quality food that contributes to human health and nutrition is one of those services. Public goods provided by sheep farming include:-
 - Provision of affordable, quality, nutritious food.
 - Protection of natural capital such as air, water, soil and carbon.
 - Water catchment management.
 - Grazing for biodiversity and habitat management.
 - Provision of animal welfare standards.
 - Contribution to public health and wellbeing through access and enjoyment.
 - Contribution to the nation's food security.
 - Maintenance of rural society, heritage and skills.
- Any new payment structure based on rewarding public good must start from a point that recognises what farmers are already doing and, via a simple entry-level model that allows the majority of everyday farms to benefit, provide an average baseline payment in recognition of the broad public value of productive farming. This can be further built on via optional schemes.



- Funding schemes should find ways to improve the current system of distribution and administration of financial support, with an increased proportion of funding going to active farmers.
- All businesses and individuals who take a risk by farming should be rewarded, including landless livestock keepers who have historically been excluded from support structures.
- All schemes should be structured so farmers can access the funds in a straightforward way without the need to use agents.
- A programme that is strongly focused towards truly active farmers should include:-
 - **Capital investment support/grant funding** to encourage investment in efficiency and agri-environment improvements such as farm buildings, handling systems, fencing, bracken management etc.
 - **An efficiency and productivity scheme** including farm health planning, disease screening, post mortems and involvement in accreditation schemes, and soil and pasture management.
 - **A public goods reward scheme**, with an entry level as described above and an optional, deeper level to broaden out the prescriptive nature of existing agri-environment schemes with a more intuitive, outcome-based approach based on the desired outcomes of safe food production from an enhanced environment.
 - **Succession planning and facilitation** to enable older farmers to retire and younger farmers to come through. This would include: start-up or low interest loans for new entrants; percentage-based additional payments for young entrants who qualify; relaxation of planning controls to encourage older farmers to retire and stay on the farm; and tax breaks to encourage business succession.
 - **Additional support for farming activity** in uplands, hill and marginal areas, continuing to use existing land classification for Less Favoured Areas and Areas of Natural Constraint. These areas are home to 41% of English ewes, 63% of Welsh cattle and sheep holdings, 80% of Northern Irish sheep and 91% of Scottish ewes.
- To reflect the importance of the economic, environmental and social benefits of sheep farming, agriculture should no longer be disadvantaged against forestry via taxation status.

Regulation

- Brexit offers the chance for farming departments across the four UK nations and industry to examine current regulations and see whether they can be made less restrictive. The aim should be for regulation to become risk-based.
- NSA identifies one clear priority as the immediate stripping back of the out-dated and cumbersome sheep TSE controls, including the need for 100% SRM removal, which requires carcasses of older sheep to be split during processing.
- Regulations that help the industry meet export standards should be retained – but these should also be reviewed to make sure they are realistic. Maintaining environmental and welfare legislation is also important to underpin the sound and publicly-supported credentials of sheepmeat production.



- Regulations should be consistent across all four UK nations. Special attention is needed for Northern Ireland as the only country with a physical border with another EU member state.
- The post-Brexit successor to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) must be simple and have less red tape than currently. Tolerance levels must be proportionate and realistic, and the current system of inspections (including the role of RPA) be simplified by optimising existing farm information already being used.
- Farm assurance and certification schemes should be founded on a scheme that guarantees domestic and export standards, while allowing higher, eg welfare or agri-environmental standards, via additional bolt-ons or other schemes.

Animal disease

- Animal diseases do not respect borders. Collaboration with other nations must continue to ensure exotic/emerging disease are monitored and animal movements managed when needed – within and outside the UK.
- Illegal meat imports continue to pose an animal health risk. Defra should remain the overarching body to ensure consistency of approach to the management of risk across the UK.



Other key areas

- **Investment in research and development:** Research and development is essential and should always be outcome-based to ensure grassroots sheep farmers benefit from it. Collaboration with other nations will ensure resources are best exploited.
- **Industry levies:** Current industry levies must be protected and continue to be used in a way determined by the industry and not the Government/Treasury, and be for the benefit of the industry as a whole.
- **Migrant labour:** There will be a need for visas for migrant labour from other countries where the need exists, including permanent positions in abattoirs and for seasonal shearing work.
- **Insurance/price protection schemes:** NSA would like more information from the Government on proposed insurance/price protection schemes before taking a position on their suitability for the sheep sector. However, it believes providing an average baseline payment in recognition of the broad public value of productive farming (including provision of nutritious food in a volatile marketplace) will act as a buffer against economic challenges and may remove the need for any such additional schemes.



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