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What does a transition to a nature-based economy look like to English upland farmers?

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Abstract

Transitioning to nature-based land management methods such as agricultural rewilding and regenerative farming represents an opportunity to slow down ecosystem collapse and mitigate climate change whilst also responding to social and economic issues. However, this transition also presents significant challenges for rural communities that sustain a living from existing forms of land management. In England, farmers and other land managers face uncertainties around subsidies, precarious income streams, and a complex and emerging policy and legislative environment. These challenges are further heightened because existing forms of land management are often seen to underpin rural identities and narratives of belonging. As such, changes to policy and legislation are often perceived to be enforced on rural communities by 'outsiders'.

England's emerging policy around 'public money for public goods' provides an internationally significant opportunity to evaluate these challenges in ways transferable to other contexts. In this 'soap box' we ask *what are the practical opportunities for farmers and land managers wishing to transition towards nature recovery?* We draw together the range of existing and emerging public and private sector income streams and evaluate them alongside the new policy and legislation emerging in England. Drawing on evidence from workshops and interviews, we then examine the practical barriers of uptake to these different opportunities from the perceptions of those most directly affected.

This approach helps map how farmers and other land-based businesses are starting to navigate the opportunities and challenges ushered in by new land management policies and funding regimes. We then discuss how these narratives are relevant to other European localities by showing how the transition is perceived. In doing so, we make a case for further developing this important research agenda.

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