

PRESS RELEASE: CONSERVATION BODY CALLS FOR SUPPORT FOR EXMOOR FARMERS

The Exmoor Society attaches great importance to the well-being of Exmoor's farmers. Exmoor farming and landscape are inseparable. What happens in farming has impacts on the people who determine both the cultural and material fabric of Exmoor National Park and so, inevitably, its visual aspects. For those reasons, The Exmoor Society is constantly vigilant about all matters relating to developments in farming practice, and alert to the direction and potential consequences of policy change. For instance, last year a confidential analysis of the economic state of Exmoor farms participating in its Farm Business Survey sample was conducted by Duchy College Rural Business School on our behalf. The study was financed by the National Park Authority. It confirmed the high dependence of Exmoor farms for their viability on money received for providing environmental benefits for society. Nowadays, reliance on cattle and sheep production to make a living is insufficient.

Dr Keith Howe, Exmoor Society trustee, said 'Brexit referendum vote inevitably means a period of uncertainty for farmers until a new domestic farm policy replaces the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union. Although subject to significant amendment over the years, this has been the framework for UK farm policy since 1973. It remains to be seen precisely what shape future policy takes but, unlike for many areas of the national economy, the outcome for farming is likely to prove relatively uncontroversial. For a long time there has been a widespread political consensus in the UK that livestock and crop production should be determined by free market prices. Public spending should be focused instead on paying farmers to provide a wide range of environmental products, including ecosystem services such as carbon capture, cleaner water and flood control and maintaining landscape quality and other cultural services.'

'For many years, farmers have received direct income payments, now under the so-called Basic Payments Scheme, which were never intended to last indefinitely. Governments looking to cut budget expenditures are unlikely to maintain these payments unless they can be shown to provide the kind of environmental products society wants. Attributing financial values to these unconventional products obtained from farm resources is often extremely difficult, but must be attempted wherever possible.'

The Exmoor Society Spring Conference 2017, in partnership with the National Park Authority, is devoted to exploring the issues in relation to the idea of 'natural capital'. It will be held on Friday 7 April in Dulverton Town Hall with keynote speakers of Profs Dieter Helm and Ian Bateman, both of whom sit on the Government's Natural Capital Committee. Society Chairman, Rachel Thomas, said, 'The Exmoor Hill Farming Network (EHFN) is an exemplar of best practice for knowledge transfer between and on behalf of farmers as they confront the need to adapt to ever-changing business and technological conditions. Professor John Wibberley serves on its steering group. In July 2017 he will explain and discuss EHFN's work at the International Farm Management Association Conference in Edinburgh. Dr Keith Howe was a panel member for EHFN's autumn discussion of Exmoor farmers' hopes and expectations of Brexit. He is also a member of the Campaign for National Parks (CNP) Working Party on Farming in the English Uplands, with particular responsibility to ensure that the interests of Exmoor farming, different in many ways from upland farming elsewhere in England, is not overlooked. Both Exmoor Society trustees, John and Keith regularly participate in the South West Uplands Network. The Society believes that it is important to emphasise the value of upland farming and its crucial link with the richness and diversity of Exmoor's unique landscapes.'

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