



Press Release

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A new perspective on land use is needed for the 21st century

A new approach to managing the UK's land will be vital to meet the challenges of the 21st century, according to the latest report from Foresight, the Government's futures think tank.

'Land Use Futures' looks at how landscapes and land use could change in the UK over the next 50 years. It concludes that the present way the land system is managed in the UK will need to change. There are already pressures on land, but these will intensify in parts of the country, such as in the South East of England. Shortages in critical public goods – such as water supply, biodiversity, carbon sinks and urban green space – could result unless carefully managed.

The report, sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Communities and Local Government (CLG), outlines the findings of an extensive two-year study involving over 300 experts in subjects ranging from ecology, economics, planning and geography.

Its main findings are that:

Land is a versatile national asset playing a crucial role in fostering people's physical and mental wellbeing, and supporting prosperity. But the land system will come under new pressures over the next 50 years:

From climate change; and

- A growing and ageing population with more people living alone.

And new demands:

- The rise of the low carbon agenda alongside rising expectations associated with growing incomes – more space for living and better transport.

Decisions will be needed on crucial issues such as how to balance local and national interests; what is the appropriate mix of market incentives and regulation to guide future land use change, and how government can improve the strategic use of space and assets when land is mostly under private ownership.

Professor John Beddington, the Government's Chief Scientist and the project director said:

“Together with our human capital, land is possibly our greatest asset. It supports our prosperity, our wellbeing and forms the bedrock of our cultural and national identity. However, many of the current systems and ideas about what is the best use of land date back to around the Second World War. A land management system fit for the 21st century needs to draw on the latest science and evidence on how changes in the use and management of land interact to affect people and the natural environment, and to reflect the diversity of benefits that land can deliver.

“This project is the first even-handed look across such a broad spectrum of land use sectors, spanning rural and urban uses including, agriculture, transport and housing. The analysis highlights the challenges, opportunities and choices we face.

“Business as usual is not an option over the long-term. Without being smart about how land is used, we risk missing targets, such as halting biodiversity loss. The effects of climate change and new pressures on land could escalate, seriously eroding quality of life.

These are big issues which require national oversight and the report argues that strategic objectives to guide future land use change are needed. This detailed report finds that Government now needs to find a way to coordinate work across land use sectors, promote the smarter use of land and to reward land owners and managers for sustainable practices.”

Drawing on over 35 expert papers, the report sets out how land is used, what it is valued for, the challenges the land system will face and the critical choices for Government.

Findings include:

Where we are now:

The best UK landscapes are a great source of pride. Visions of community and countryside are deeply entrenched in our culture. Historically and architecturally interesting landscapes have been retained and protected and concern for the natural environment is a high priority for many people.

But there are also key concerns for society: having enough space to live, whether travel congestion will get worse and having affordable, clean energy.

The governance system has sought to balance these concerns. Historical objectives to contain urban sprawl, to ensure enough land is available for food production, and to provide green spaces for people to enjoy, have largely been met.

These objectives have resulted in the patterns of land use seen today. Just under 12% of UK land is forest and woodland. Less than 10% of land in England is 'developed' (including gardens). And almost three quarters of land in the UK is used for agriculture. There is also evidence of significant misconceptions about how land is used, and people's ideas about land use are often in conflict.

Critical choices for Government

The scale of the challenges identified in the report means that Government and the land use community need to take stock. There are critical choices to be made now, including:

- What values and societal expectations need to be met and what are the priorities for land use, including in different parts of the country;
- How to accommodate the increasing need for residential and commercial development whilst also protecting highly valued landscapes and natural assets;
- Whether to try to preserve certain historic natural environments and ancient forests in the face of climate change, or to manage change in these;
- How to promote sustainable management of land, owned by private individuals; and how to engage people and communities on questions related to the future use of land whilst also addressing national priorities.

Notes to editors:

1. Download the full report at <http://www.foresight.gov.uk> (only available from Friday 26 February.)
2. Foresight is in the Government Office for Science (GO-Science). GO-Science supports the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser in ensuring that the Government has access to, and uses, the best science and engineering advice. It is located within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but is professionally independent of it.
3. The UK Government's Foresight Programme helps Government think systematically about the future. Foresight uses the latest scientific and other evidence to provide signposts for policymakers in tackling future challenges.
4. For further enquires, please contact the GO Science Press Office on 0207 215 5080