



## **Still in Limbo': Top Industry Figures Condemn Post-Brexit Policy Vacuum**

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***Circulated on behalf of the Conference Organising Committee*** *\*\*The conference is a joint venture between Armstrong Watson, the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), Hexham and Northern Marts, HSBC, Womble Bond Dickinson, Youngs RPS and the Soil Association.*

**The Northern Farming Conference 2025 (5 November 2025) delivered an urgent and at times impassioned critique of UK agricultural policy, with industry leaders condemning a 'policy vacuum' while simultaneously warning farmers that future survival hinges on 'extreme financial professionalism'.**

Around 240 delegates attended the conference which was held at Hexham Auction Mart.

The conference, themed 'People, Planning and Profit: Building a Resilient Farming Future', opened with Conference Chair Samantha Charlton, Director (Beef and Lamb) at AHDB, setting the stage by emphasising the human element central to the sector's future.

"Farming is all about people. You may have heard that every problem is a people's problem — but if that's the case, then surely every solution should start with people."

**Policy Under Fire: Leaders Demand 'Fundamental Reset' and Defined Food Security**

The morning's flagship panel session offered an unflinching, critical review of post-Brexit agricultural policy. The speakers delivered a damning assessment of what many described as a policy vacuum, highlighting government indecision, ministerial instability, and the urgent need for a cohesive, long-term plan for UK farming.

The discussion, featuring Lord Curry of Kirkharle, Alistair Carmichael MP, Baroness Minette Batters, and Jeremy Moody of the CAAV, centred on three pressing themes: the absence of a clear national vision for agriculture, the failure to define food security, and the growing vulnerability of average-sized farms in the policy transition.

### **Condemning Instability**

Lord Curry delivered a critique of the government's post-Brexit performance, warning that constant ministerial turnover had paralysed progress and left the sector 'still in limbo'.

"In my career, I've had to deal with 22 Secretaries of State or Ministers... since we took the [Brexit] vote in 2016, we've had 10 Secretaries of State. This is important because it's one of the reasons why I think we're still in limbo as far as policy is concerned."

Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair of the EFRA Select Committee, reinforced the crucial need to define food security in meaningful, actionable terms, building on the Prime Minister's assertion that it is national security.

"Food production has got to be put back into the heart of our agricultural policy. Do that, and you'll find that the other goals — nature restoration, climate mitigation, flood management — are basically achieved."

### **The Call for a Reset**

Former NFU President Baroness Minette Batters outlined the urgent need for a 'fundamental reset' and a politically bulletproof long-term roadmap for farming. She focused her concern on the increasing financial pressures facing mid-performing farms that form the backbone of UK food production.

"The ones producing the bulk of our output are the mid-performing farmers. They are farming 57% of land area and 65% of farming output, and they are vulnerable."

Closing the panel, Jeremy Moody, Secretary and Advisor for the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers (CAAV), delivered a sharp dose of reality, declaring that the agricultural transition period is effectively over.

"The government's been telling you for a year — you are commanders of your own businesses. You are now running your businesses, making your profits outside the framework."

### **Agricultural Economics: Resilience and Profitability**

The second morning session shifted from policy critique to practical economics, with Professor Paul Wilson, Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Nottingham, delivering a data-rich exploration of the drivers shaping farm profitability and resilience.

Professor Wilson highlighted that efficiency and cost control remain the key determinants of farm profitability, noting that these business imperatives increasingly align with environmental sustainability goals. Drawing on AHDB analysis, he identified the financial characteristics defining top-performing farms.

"The profitability aspects do focus on those farmers investing in the variable costs that are delivering the good output... whilst keeping a good control on those fixed costs."

He further stressed that the path to Net Zero should be viewed not as an environmental burden but as a business opportunity, as most actions that reduce a farm's carbon footprint also lead to more efficient resource use. Professor Wilson concluded by raising a critical policy idea: the need for a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) for food to level the playing field for UK producers meeting higher environmental standards.

### **Farmers' Panel: Scaling, Survival, and the Uncomfortable Truth**

The afternoon session brought together four working farmers for a candid discussion on the realities of running modern farm businesses. Chaired by Jen Oglesby, the panel—featuring Duncan Morrison (sheep and cattle), Graham Rutherford (organic livestock), Helen Marsden (contract farming), and Thomas Todd (arable)—tackled financial measurement, business structure, and the lessons learned from hard experience.

The core message across all sectors was clear: extreme financial professionalism will be vital for survival as government support declines.

Chair Oglesby highlighted the foundation of this professionalism, stating: "People really need to have a handle on their costs, cash flow, budgets — these seem to be massive contributing factors to business success."

Duncan Morrison emphasised the importance of focusing on working capital over headline profit figures, particularly when managing livestock.

"It's amazing how the profit on your profit and loss accounts doesn't do anything — it's not in your bank account and you'll never actually see it, especially when you're dealing with breeding livestock."

Thomas Todd shared how regenerative practices have transformed his arable business, creating stability and new income opportunities.

"The SFI and ecosystems pay me from the carbon capture — and that's quite a nice little earner... more beneficial than I thought it was going to be."

When asked to share one "uncomfortable truth" about the future of UK farming, the panel was unanimous: there will inevitably be fewer farmers. Graham Rutherford pointed to the narrow margins in livestock farming.

"Profitability on the sheep and the cattle is there, but it's not enormous. If that disappears, then it becomes more of a numbers game."

Despite the challenges, the final session of the day, led by Kat Thorne, The Morning Gamechanger, brought an energising close. Her interactive talk encouraged delegates

to take the lessons of the day—around people, planning, and profit—and apply them with purpose, positivity, and resilience in their own businesses. The conference ultimately captured a dual sense of urgency and determination to chart a new, resilient, and profitable path for UK farming.