News & Reports

Rewarding farmers for high animal welfare

By Josh Loeb

LANDMARK legislation – described as forming part of the biggest shakeup of British agriculture in 40 years – was introduced in parliament last week.

The government’s Agriculture Bill, which has been long awaited and heavily trailed in the media, sets out a blueprint for the future of farming in England after the UK leaves the EU.

Brexit means the UK will no longer adhere to the rules of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which links subsidies from Brussels to the amount of land farmers own or manage, thereby disproportionately benefiting larger landowners.

The UK government hopes to replace this with a system whereby farmers are rewarded for ‘public goods’ such as better air and water quality, higher animal welfare standards, good soil health and the creation of wildlife habitat.

The new system will be phased in gradually over a seven-year transition period, due to start in 2021. Overall annual funding for farm support will be maintained at current levels for the duration of this parliament, environment secretary Theresa Villiers said. The new system will also entail annual reporting to parliament about domestic food security, alongside measures intended to bring about improved traceability.

‘We will move away from the EU’s bureaucratic CAP and towards a fairer system which rewards our hard-working farmers for delivering public goods, celebrating their world-leading environmental work and innovative, modern approach to food production,’ Villiers said.

‘We will continue to champion British produce and support farmers to adapt to our new pioneering approach to agriculture through a seven-year transition period in England, ensuring we unleash the potential of our farmers for the future.’

Agricultural issues are devolved, meaning that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are each expected to be given the freedom to design their own, bespoke systems also. Many farmers and vets have broadly welcomed Defra’s proposals but also highlighted concern about the potential impact of future post-Brexit trade deals.

BVA president Daniella Dos Santos said she was pleased to see that animal health and welfare had been given ‘the prominence it deserves’, adding: ‘We are rightly recognised as a world leader for our animal welfare standards, so measures that incentivise industry to both maintain and enhance those standards are very positive and put the country on a firm footing as we build future trade links.

‘It will be really important for strong commitments to animal health and welfare to be replicated in the devolved administrations as legislation is developed across the UK and to coordinate throughout the UK food chain.

‘BVA stands with the wider farming industry in pushing for assurances that imports produced to lower animal health and welfare standards will not be accepted as part of future trade deals.

‘There must be no mixed messages. The UK cannot commit to raising the bar domestically while allowing in goods that don’t meet the high standards that British consumers rightly want and expect.’

The National Farmers’ Union said it was now pressing for a standards commission to be created ‘as a matter of priority’ to oversee and advise on future food trade policy and negotiations.

Its president, Minette Batters, said: ‘A commitment to regularly report on food security to parliament is reassuring but this must be more than simply a box-ticking exercise. It is vital that British farming continues to contribute a significant proportion of our nation’s food needs and that we set the ambition of growing more, selling more and exporting more British food.

‘We look forward to more detail about how exactly the food security provisions will operate and how they account for the strategic importance of a robust and resilient domestic farming sector.’

Meanwhile, the National Office of Animal Health, an animal medicines industry lobby group, called for more detail about commitments on traceability.

Its chief executive, Dawn Howard, said: ‘We welcome the proposed incentivisation to farmers in England but note that disease knows no borders. A joined-up approach with good collaboration throughout the UK is essential for real progress to be made.’

Senior policy manager at The Wildlife Trusts Ellie Brodie said the Agriculture Bill ‘has the potential to help bring nature back by supporting farmers to restore it’, while the RSPCA’s head of public affairs, David Bowles, hailed it as a ‘crucial opportunity’.●