



Scottish  
Environment  
LINK

## How to talk to your MSP about the Agriculture Bill

A Farm for Scotland's Future campaign briefing, September 2023

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### Introduction

Farming is vital to Scotland's Future. As well as producing food, farmers and crofters manage three quarters of Scotland's land. But the dominant farming methods of today make farming Scotland's second biggest source of climate emissions, and a major cause of the depletion of our nature.

The Scottish government's Agriculture Bill, expected this autumn, is a once in a lifetime opportunity to make farming work for nature, climate and people.

Scotland's outdated farm funding system is failing to help farmers and crofters make the transition to sustainable farming. We need the Agriculture Bill to create a new funding system that helps all farmers and crofters produce food in ways that restore nature, tackle climate change, and revitalise our rural areas.

MSPs will be scrutinising the bill as it passes through parliament, and will have the opportunity to propose and vote on amendments. It's crucial that they hear their constituents calling for public spending on farming to support methods that work for nature, climate and people.

### The Farm for Scotland's Future campaign

The [Farm for Scotland's Future campaign](#) was launched in 2022 by members of [Scottish Environment LINK](#), and is backed by 41 environmental, farming and food organisations. The campaign calls on the Scottish government to:

- Replace the decades-old farm funding system with one that works for nature, climate and people
- Ensure that at least three quarters of public spending on farming supports methods that restore nature and tackle climate change
- Support all farmers and crofters in the transition to sustainable farming.

## **Key points to make to your MSP**

### **1/ The dominant farming methods of today make farming a major cause of nature loss, and Scotland's second biggest source of climate emissions. But it doesn't have to be this way.**

Industrial farming practices such as the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers, overgrazing, and the clearance of natural vegetation, are a problem for both nature and the climate. We live in one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with the Biodiversity Intactness Indicator ranking Scotland 28th from bottom out of 240 countries. And the latest Scottish climate figures show that emissions from agriculture have risen, with only the transport sector contributing more to climate change.

However, a growing number of farmers and crofters are working to restore nature and to make farming part of the solution to the climate crisis. The Agriculture Bill must create a system that rewards this best practice, and helps the industry as a whole make the transition to sustainable farming.

### **2/ There is no food security without a stable climate and a healthy natural environment.**

Food production, and ultimately food security, depend on the health of soil, pollinators and natural pest and disease regulators. All of these are compromised in industrialised farming systems with high levels of chemical inputs. Without a stable climate and healthy ecosystems, our ability to produce food will increasingly be threatened.

We are already seeing climate change having an impact on Scottish agriculture. Extreme weather contributed to losses of up to £161m for Scotland's farmers during 2017 and 2018.

### **3/ Scotland needs a new farm funding system that supports all farmers and crofters in the transition to sustainable farming. At least three quarters of public spending on farming should support methods that restore nature and tackle climate change as well as producing food.**

The current farm funding system is unfair and inefficient. Most payments are based on agricultural area, which means they go to the farmers who own the most land, rather than paying farmers for managing the land well. The distribution of funding is massively weighted towards a minority of large landowners.

Instead, the new system should be focused on using public money to achieve public policy objectives, including restoring nature and mitigating climate change.

## What can your MSP do to help?

At the initial stage of the Agriculture Bill, the most important thing your MSP can do is to attend the 'stage 1' debate - the first debate on the bill in the Scottish parliament. Ask them to attend and to raise the points outlined above.

At the later stages of the bill, there are likely to be amendments proposed to improve or strengthen the bill, that you can ask your MSP to vote for. [Join the Farm for Scotland's Future campaign](#) to make sure you receive emails from us about amendments and anything else you can ask your MSP to do.

## Some potential questions/arguments and suggested responses

### Question: Don't we need to prioritise food security above all else?

**Suggested response:** Food security is not simply about food production: it requires a stable climate and healthy ecosystems. A narrow focus on increasing production has driven an increasingly intensive agricultural system which has eliminated species diversity both in the soil and above ground.

### Question: Won't the changes you're proposing be bad for farmers' businesses?

**Suggested response:** The current system of direct payments based on agricultural area doesn't work for the vast majority of those in the sector. At present, the top 20% of claimants receive 62% of the direct payments budget – whilst the bottom 40% of claimants receive just 5%. A system that incentivised ways of producing food in harmony with nature and the climate would be much fairer for farmers and crofters as well as helping to tackle the huge environmental challenges we face.

Switching to more sustainable methods can also in itself help farmers cut costs, for example by reducing or eliminating the need for expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

The costs of inaction are significant - for example, soil erosion is estimated to cost £50m per year in Scotland.

## A guide to lobbying MSPs

You can find out who your MSPs are on the Scottish Parliament website, at <https://www.parliament.scot/msps>. Everyone in Scotland is represented by eight MSPs – one for your local constituency and seven covering your wider region. Which MSP you wish to contact is completely up to you, and this can be used to your advantage: by choosing an MSP from a party likely to be sympathetic and champion the issue, or from one whose position is less certain if you wish to persuade them to vote the right way on an upcoming decision.

One of your MSPs might be a party spokesperson, or even the government minister, for the issue you're campaigning on, or sit on the relevant Scottish Parliament committee.

MSPs are generally in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh from Tuesday to Thursday, and in their own constituency or region from Friday to Monday. You can arrange to meet them in either location, depending on which is more convenient for you.

Most MSPs work some Saturdays, so consider this option if you work Monday to Friday. From 7 to 22 October 2023 Parliament is on recess and most MSPs will be in their local constituency, so you may have more chance of meeting them during that period.

You can arrange a meeting by emailing your MSP, or by phoning either their Edinburgh office or their constituency office. Confirm that you are a constituent of the MSP and ask for a meeting. It's best to give as much information as you can, so: say what the meeting is about and to say how many people will be attending (if you're bringing anyone else with you).

### **Before meeting with your MSP**

Remember that you don't have to be an expert in order to speak with your MSP. It's an important part of their role to listen to their constituents' concerns and answer their questions, so you are not wasting anybody's time by asking for a meeting.

Prior to meeting with you MSP it would be beneficial to do some research and find out a bit more about them. Which party are they from? Take a look at their manifesto. Are they a part of any committees? What do they look like (so that you recognise them when you meet)? Have a look at their social media and website - do they have any specific interests?

It's also a good idea to let your MSP know what it is you wish to discuss with them. They can then come prepared and will be in a better place to answer your questions.

For your own benefit it is worthwhile having a think about:

- What exactly are you asking your MSP to do?
- What will your MSP need to know in order to understand what you're asking?
- What questions are they likely to ask you?

To make the most of the meeting it is a good idea to have three main points you want to make and one thing you want your MSP to do.

Feel free to take notes in with you to keep you on track!

### **During the meeting**

A meeting with your MSP isn't a parliamentary debate – the vast majority of MSPs will be welcoming, friendly and will genuinely listen (even if they don't end up agreeing with you). You should do the same – be honest about your disagreements, but it's rarely helpful to be aggressive or confrontational.

Your MSP will normally start by giving you time to explain what you've come to talk about. You can use this time to give a little background (your research will help you judge how much understanding the MSP already has), set out the problem and the solutions you want, and tell the MSP how they can help.

Remember your three main points and the one thing you want your MSP to do, and try to cover these in your opening explanation.

In the rest of your conversation, the MSP is likely to want to:

- Tell you what they or their party think and/or has already done on the issue
- Ask questions about the issue, and/or about the parliamentary business and government policies that relate to it
- Ask what they can do to help, or make their own suggestion of what they can do
- Sometimes, make suggestions of other things you could do, or other people to talk to

Don't be afraid to ask your own questions of your MSP. For example, they might be able to tell you:

- What their own party and other parties think about your issue
- What other opportunities are coming up in Parliament for you to influence debate or policy
- Who the most influential people on your issue are, and the best way to approach them

Take notes during your meeting! Make a note of your MSP's views and any helpful information they give you. It's especially important to write down anything they promise to do for you, and anything you say you'll do (for example, looking up the answers to any questions you can't answer straight away).

Before you finish the meeting, make sure to repeat your three main points and the one thing you want your MSP to do, plus anything else the MSP agreed to do during the meeting.

### **After the meeting**

Afterwards, contact your MSP to thank them for the meeting, provide them with any further information they've asked for, and remind them of any action they committed to taking. You can also mention anything you didn't get a chance to say during the meeting. Keep it short!

**Tell us about the meeting. It would be really useful for us to know which MSP you talked to, what they think about the Agriculture Bill, and any action they have committed to taking. Email campaign coordinator Miriam on [miriam@scotlink.org](mailto:miriam@scotlink.org).**

## **How a bill passes through parliament**

**Pre-bill consultation:** The Scottish government collects evidence from relevant stakeholders before drafting the bill. The Agriculture Bill consultation took place in autumn 2022.

**Bill Introduced:** The Scottish government publishes the draft bill, and a lead parliamentary committee is assigned to scrutinise it.

**Stage 1:** At this stage the committee will make key considerations, taking evidence from a range of stakeholders (e.g. public sector, third sector, private sector, members of the public). Once the evidence has been gathered the committee will compile and publish a report of their findings which

will then be presented to parliament. A full parliamentary debate will then take place to agree to the principles of the bill and if these are accepted the bill will progress on to stage 2.

**Stage 2:** This is where amendments to the bill can be submitted by MSPs after they have consulted with members of the public, stakeholders and relevant organisations about important points they would like changed. This is a key opportunity to directly influence legislation as organisations can contact MSPs with proposed amendments. The lead committee votes to accept or reject amendments, and the bill progresses to stage 3 with the wording agreed by the committee.

**Stage 3:** Some amendments do come forward at this stage, but generally the issues should have been discussed at a prior stage. Parliament will then have a debate on the bill and will vote on each individual amendment. Following this, there will be a final vote on accepting the bill as amended. The bill will then gain Royal Assent from the King formally making it an Act of Parliament.

## Further reading

### About the issues

Farm for Scotland's Future campaign website: <https://farmforscotlandsfuture.scot/>

A report from Scottish Environment LINK: Farm for Scotland's Future - the case for change: <https://farmforscotlandsfuture.scot/farm-for-scotlands-future-the-case-for-change/>

[NB: Since this report was published in May 2023, new figures have moved farming from the third biggest to the second biggest climate emitter in Scotland.]

### About MSPs and the Scottish Parliament

Scottish Parliament website: <https://www.parliament.scot/>

### For further information contact:

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