

Time for Defra to use our freedoms from the EU

The Defra website is more of a history lesson than a celebration of new opportunities and freedoms for farmers. Instead of brimming over with the changes they want to make to our fishing and farming policies now we can control them, it faithfully records the EU laws, rules and old schemes that dominated us for so long. It tells us there is a Countryside Productivity scheme offering only small grants funded by the EU, but goes on to say it is closed. It tells us there were forestry, Water, waste and food productivity schemes but these are also all closed.

It is true it does also now set out more recent U.K. schemes of support but most of these are for environmental improvements. Some of its latest initiatives in wilding and nature look like UK versions of work being done in the EU. Some are worthwhile but the overall impression given is the Department wants less land available for food production and has not yet got round to offering positive support for better farming to boost our output.

You could of course say why not leave it all to the market? There are two reasons. The first is other countries do not , so the UK has to compete under the EU free trade arrangements with farms on the continent that do get subsidies and other support. The second is if the Department itself is offering cash incentives not to farm on potential farmland it may need to level the playing field by offering suitable help for good farming on that land. It is all very well to say wilding cuts the carbon output on the land wilded, but if we then have to transport food into the UK from hundreds or even thousands of miles away, grown and produced in carbon generating ways, we have done nothing to save the planet and much to damage the UK economy.

The government has promised new schemes to stimulate innovation, investment and promotion of more U.K. food. I wish it would get on with them. We need to promote our farms and food now. There is no good reason for delay.