

# The future of farming in Wales

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Wales is a small country and is part of the United Kingdom. It is predominantly rural and has a population of about three million people. In 1994, there were 63,750 farmers in Wales, of which 13,000 were part time. By 2001, this number had fallen to 56,360 and more were working part-time. This pattern is common to developed economies where technological developments have meant that food can be produced using less labour. It is likely the number of full-time farmers in Wales will continue to fall.

Wales has its own devolved government, the National Assembly of Wales, which is responsible to the United Kingdom government in London. The Assembly is autonomous as far as agricultural affairs are concerned. The Assembly has a Minister for the Environment, Planning and Rural Affairs who is well aware that, even with EU subsidies, Welsh agriculture is faring badly and young people are leaving farming. When these youngsters go they take with them skills and enthusiasm that are very difficult to replace. In 2001, the Assembly published a document called "*Farming for the future – a new direction for farming in Wales*". This document sets out its policies for agriculture in Wales for the period 2000-2010 and devotes particular attention to young farmers recognizing that when 50% of farmers are over 55 years of age it is particularly difficult to get the sector to adapt creatively to a rapidly changing economic climate.

The policies set out in "*Farming for the future*" include vocational training so that key areas of specialist expertise are not lost from the industry and that youngsters are skilled enough to command decent wages from their employers. Training ranges from computer courses to agricultural crafts. The document also introduces share farming, an innovative joint-venture business arrangement where an established farmer and a young farmer share the costs and risks of a farming enterprise and share any eventual profit. Usually the existing farmer would provide the land and buildings and the young farmer the labour and machinery. Both would contribute to the costs. The Assembly will ensure young farmers get help in finding partners, as well as in negotiating contracts and other legal matters.

The main aim of "*Farming for the future*", however, is to help young farmers farm in environmentally sustainable ways through its *Tir Gofal* (*Care of the land*) policy. Each farmer who signs up

to this scheme is assigned a National Assembly project officer who assesses the farm's opportunities to enhance the environment and possibly to help the farm to convert to organic status. Farmers have to abide by strict rules governing the way they farm and must commit to various conservation tasks including repairing dry stone walling, hedgerow restoration, providing nest boxes for birds, woodland management and coppicing for biomass fuel, for which they are paid. Youngsters trained in conservation tasks will be able to sell their services to farmers and earn an income for themselves. To get these schemes going organizations (usually registered NGOs) are being invited to bid for "local action group" status, so they can apply for funds to start sustainable development projects to stimulate new farm and off-farm opportunities. One such example is an energy group that is studying how local communities can conserve and produce renewable energy sources. The Rural Affairs Department also acknowledges that some farmland needs to be taken out of agricultural production to reduce surpluses and is preparing to give economic help to farmers so they can plant woodlands.

The Assembly drew up its policy after wide consultation with various interested parties such as farmers' unions, the women farmer's union, the Countryside Commission for Wales, consumer groups, wildlife protection societies and young farmer clubs.

Apart from government initiatives, individual Welshmen have also been concerned with the future of Welsh farming. One example is a Welsh agricultural bank manager called Mr Dai Davies, who had the vision in the 1980s to realize that high achieving agricultural students throughout Wales needed a club where they were able to meet and exchange ideas that would not just be beneficial to themselves but to Welsh agriculture as a whole. He formed "Future Farmers of Wales" and invited top performing students to join. At the moment the club has about 140 members and encourages its people to network, participate in overseas study tours, and put forward their own policies for the future of Welsh agriculture and rural regeneration. It also acts as a lobbying body and is recognized by the Assembly and by the education authorities. He is convinced that this type of association can work and produce tangible results in any agricultural country.

As a farmer myself, I am encouraged to know that younger generations of farmers are being motivated to develop sustainable rural enterprises that may one day mean my own son can live and work in our beautiful country.

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**In this rich and fertile landscape, providing young people with the skills and crafts to manage nature has created rural livelihood options.**

