

SPEECH FOR MINISTER JIM PAICE

**ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF ENGLAND SEMINAR “SUSTAINABLE
INTENSIFICATION & FARMLAND BIRDS”**

I feel and care about Wildlife and I am concerned about
Wildlife.

Importance of the subject

Subject could not be more important - we look to our farmers to simultaneously:

- contribute to feeding a world population to 9 billion
- contribute to food security for UK
- deliver good environmental outcomes

Announcement of the White Paper on the Natural Environment, also now working on the Green Food Project bring everyone together from organisation such as FDF, CLA, NFU, RSPB to bring a solution.

That's quite a task list.

to succeed it requires us, amongst other things :

- to pool knowledge and expertise so that there are no false divides, for example between those who produce and those who conserve
- to be as clear as we can about what the evidence is actually telling us : a point to which I shall return a number of times

- to be frank in evaluating what is and isn't working

So I welcome your seminar today and the objectives you have set for it

Problem

Previous speakers have set out the scientific background - I won't repeat all that detail.

But everyone is familiar with the overall picture :

Between 1970 and 2009, populations of farmland birds fell by over 50 per cent.

The main period of decline between 1970 and the mid 90s coincided with a period of agricultural intensification.

From the late 1990s to 2005 there was a period of relative overall stability, although there have been further declines since 2006.

The 2010 breeding season results published today suggest a further modest decline of about 1 per cent in farmland birds between 2009 and 2010, which is consistent with the underlying trend of a 10% decline over the previous 5 years.

There is no use adopting the blame game.

Why then are we seeing these statistics ? That is my recurrent theme for today and I shall be very interested to hear your views after I have finished speaking.

One possibility, of course, is that the statistics are reflecting something in the make-up of the index itself, rather than an underlying issue. The current index originated in the 1993 “Atlas of Breeding Birds” which put 28 species into the farmland category. Seven of those are scarce or fly mainly at night, and two are non-native. So the Government accepted the remaining 19 as representative of the farmland category.

Is that still correct ? This is a question not a statement. Are there other species that should be included, or some that should be left out ? That’s a rather detailed technical issue, I accept. But at a more fundamental level, do the statistics chime with what you experience as you go about your normal business ? And are there any alternative measures that that would give us a better picture ?

Government’s general approach to environment

At the global level, Caroline Spelman played a key role in reaching agreement on the new framework for combating biodiversity loss at Nagoya last Autumn.

Within that framework, we have published a new Natural Environment White Paper – the first of its kind for 20 years - which sets out our vision for the natural environment for the next 50 years.

Shortly afterwards we published 'Biodiversity 2020' – our new strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services.

Our proposals pick up the principles in Sir John Lawton's report 'Making Space for Nature'. We are aiming for: more areas for wildlife, which are bigger, better managed, and better joined up.

How then, will our general approach help farmland birds, and other environmental issues for which they are an indicator ?

First policy response - Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Campaign for the Farmed Environment celebrated its 2nd anniversary on Bonfire Night (Saturday 5th November).

Much good work has been achieved in those two years and I am very pleased to see farmers are making a real commitment to both the Campaign and the environment by undertaking voluntary measures.

We will be evaluating the impact of the Campaign on environmental outcomes, including on farmland birds, over the next few months.

Second policy response - agri-environment schemes

Roughly 67% of available farmland in England (more than 6.2 million ha) covered by all agri-environment schemes, with ES coverage of 61.5% (5.7 million ha). Within this coverage, more than 60.4% (5.6million ha) of available farmland is in Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) and 9.3% (864,772 ha) of this land is in Higher Level Stewardship (HLS).

Work so far undertaken to improve ES effectiveness (the Making Environmental Stewardship More Effective (MESME) project) includes:

- improving targeting;
- encouraging greater collaborative working;
- improved option uptake in ELS, and
- streamlining HLS administrative procedures,

all of which should lead to greater environmental outcomes and value for money from the scheme.

We think that the agri-environment schemes are a real success and that the changes we have in hand will make them even better. But the fact remains that they have not , or not **yet** anyway, reversed the declines in farmland birds. So why is that ? Why , even with this degree of coverage, do we still see disappointing figures for farmland birds ?

First, there is a significant time lag from deciding to change the grant scheme, to people taking up the new option, to it having a real impact on bird populations, and finally to those changes then being picked up in the monitoring. From the advice I have received we think the

total lag from all those elements could be 5 years. Or, put another way, the figures we are seeing today reflect the agri-environment regime as it was in 2005, not the present-day version.

Secondly, although the overall take-up of agri-environment is good, we are asking ourselves whether there is a sufficient take-up of the in-field options which are of most value to birds. Certainly some modelling work by Reading University has suggested that low uptake of in-field options is limiting success. And Natural England has projected that if we could secure an additional 65,000 hectares of arable field margin combined with additional in field options then that should produce an **increase** in farmland bird populations of 1% per annum. And we plan to exceed that 65,000 ha figure before 2020.

Thirdly, we think there may still be an issues about the quality of some schemes. That applies especially to those which are technically difficult to deliver such as wild bird seed mixes

Fourthly, is the issue of predation, where I think it is fair to say that the jury is still out. Those of us who live and / or work in the countryside know it to be a factor - the question is whether it is a significant factor or not. The conclusion of Defra-funded research in 2009 was that predation was indeed having an impact in some areas but that localised predation doesn't necessarily equate to national population impacts and that there is an

interaction with changes in land use - in other words, predation becomes more significant as habitats become degraded. However, where new research becomes available regarding the role of predation we will need to look carefully at this.

Finally we wonder whether there are other pressures which are cancelling out the benefits from agri-environment schemes. For example, cold winters, or changes to the wintering grounds outside the UK used by long-distance migratory species . And we also need to probe the north-south divide - why is it that declines should be greater in the south ?

So that is where our thinking currently takes us on agri-environment. Again I shall be interested in hearing whether it is an analysis you share or whether you think there is anything else which prevents the agri-environment regime, as we now know it, from hitting the target ?

Third policy response - Nature Improvement Areas

Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) are local partnership-led initiatives that will :

- tackle the fragmentation of our network of wildlife sites;
- increase their size, quality and connectivity;

- deliver a range of ecosystem service benefits including for biodiversity, such as farmland birds.

Farmers and landowners are members of several partnerships that have applied for Defra funding through a competition to create an initial 12 NIAs. We hope to be able to announce the successful partnerships around February

Conclusion

Clear from above that Government is not complacent . We are probing the reasons for the decline in farmland birds - and the underlying causes. And we are improving our response - including on agri-environment schemes.

We live in a crowded country, so the implication is that more food needs to be produced, the feeling that we can import food is irresponsible because of factors such as climate change. We need to be harmony with Nature and move on from the blame game. We need to recognise role of mankind in Nature.

I wish you well for the rest of the day; I am happy to answer a few questions before I have to leave; and I look forward to hearing the conclusions of your seminar in dues course.