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Welsh Government
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Dear Minister,

RE: Agricultural Bill: Hedgerows

CPRW welcomed the introduction of the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023, which sets the framework for Sustainable Land Management and the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme. It is clear that after leaving the EU and moving away from the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), something was needed to ensure that farmers get the support they need to help them produce the food we consume in a sustainable way.

Latest proposals include the requirement for farmers to have 10% of their land under tree cover, as one of the universal actions for which farmers will receive a baseline payment. However, the fact that hedgerows are not included in this calculation but only "individual mature trees" within them demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of hedgerows.

There are 106,000km of hedgerows in Wales, many of which are ancient, broad, and well maintained going well beyond the definition of "mature", yet these will not be counted towards this 10% requirement?

Over the years, various pieces of legislation have inadvertently encouraged, or even demanded a reduction in hedgerows across the UK. CPRW does not want *the Act*, or the SFS, to become another example.

Hedgerows are not only beautiful, but they are also proven to be highly beneficial to biodiversity, providing habitat and nature corridors, as well as acting as natural wind breaks and providing shelter to livestock and produce alike, acting as living farm boundaries.

Hedgerows were protected as landscape features through cross compliance – the rules that farmers must follow in order to receive support through the BPS: but we are not aware of any current plans to have similar protection under the SFS?

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The Climate Change Committee (CCC) in Westminster has recommended that an additional 40% **more** hedgerows be planted by 2050. CPRW believe, as do our sister charities in England and Scotland, that we need to go further than this and encourage even more hedgerow planting.

Whilst there is the current presumption to protect hedgerows, under the Hedgerow Regulations 1997, by not including hedgerows as part of the 10% of trees, you run a great risk of the SFS actually encouraging the removal of hedgerows in order to replace them with trees.

As a discussion with one of your officials discovered, there would be little to stop a landowner with substantial hedgerows ripping them out and replacing them with tree lines as shelter belts, in order to qualify for the SFS.

We believe hedges have a real contribution to meeting your commitment to plant 43,000 ha of trees by 2030 and their omission from the 10% will instead, lead to the devastation of biodiversity and disruption of ecosystems.

CPRW IMPLOR you to include hedgerows as part of the 10% of trees needed for a farmer to qualify for the SFS. We would also encourage the adoption into the SFS, similar protections for hedgerows seen under the BPS scheme, as outlined in GAEC 7 in cross compliance (Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition) which concerns the maintenance of landscape features.

Doing so would enable much greater sign-up to the SFS from farmers, protect and promote vital biodiversity habitats and corridors, as well as contributing to the global fight against climate change.

CPRW acknowledges there is widespread misunderstanding amongst the public about the range of practices undertaken to maintain hedgerows. This includes the practices of hedge-laying and coppicing.

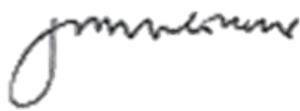
It is also important to recognise, that hedge-laying is a highly specialised, technical skill with distinct hedge-laying styles specific to geographic locations, which have evolved over many generations. CPRW holds annual hedge-laying competitions around our branches to showcase this talent and provide a better understanding to the public of the work and cultural practices involved.

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There is little current reward for farmers to maintain and develop their hedgerows and if the Welsh Government wants to encourage the practice of hedge-laying in favour of more drastic and easier routes then it needs to address this issue, and CPRW believes that the SFS would be the ideal place to do so.

I look forward to hearing from you on this vital issue and ask that include hedgerows in the 10% trees requirement.

Yours Sincerely,



Jonty Colchester
Chair
CPRW

CC. Minister for Climate Change
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FUW



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