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That Interim Period: England's Agricultural Transition

JOSE LUIS FAJARDO-ESCOFFIÉ 

Abstract

Brexit, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, has offered the UK government a unique opportunity to fundamentally reform agricultural policy. In England, the new policy—called Environmental Land Management—will reward farmers for activities that produce environmental public goods, such as clean air and water and a thriving wildlife, and prevent environmental hazards. It could lead to the biggest changes in land management since the end of World War II. This photo essay and the process of making it contributes to a better understanding of how farmers feel about the changes underway.

KEYWORDS

Brexit, farmers, agriculture, England, policy, photography

Following spread: "Slow,"
Slawston, Leicestershire,
UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis
Fajardo-Escoffié.











Previous spread: "Hand,"
Slawston, Leicestershire,
UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis
Fajardo-Escoffié.



"Oliver," Slawston,
Leicestershire, UK, 2021. Photo
by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.



"lan," Wittington, Cheltenham, UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.







"Fay," Great Easton, Market
Harborough, UK, 2021. Photo by
Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.



"The cow and the fox,"
Slawston, Leicestershire,
UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis
Fajardo-Escoffié.



Mr John Wadland wonders:

I am not in any environmental scheme.

I receive [a] single farm payment of around £80 per acre.

I am not sure what to do for the public good to receive extra payments.

I have no arable, my watercourses are all fenced off at my own expense, hedgerows have been requicked, some trees have been planted all 20–30 years ago.

My grassland is classed as permanent pasture, so I have no field boundary or six-meter strips.

I do have five ponds—some have dried out in summer.

Hedges are cut and layered periodically without stakes and binders.

My grassland is grazed in summer and cattle sold off in November. Hogget graze in the winter and [are] sold off in the spring.

I read that permanent pasture has the potential to sequester twice as much carbon as forestry and it stays longer in roots and soil.

This is the way I farm. What is the public good in that? Will it get me extra income?

(Mr. John Wadland, letter read by the author
at a local NFU (National Farmers Union) meeting,
June 2021. Leicestershire, UK)

"Mr. Wadland," Cranoe,
Market Harborough, UK, 2021.
Photo by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.



"Tractor on the street with a flag," Great Easton, Market Harborough, UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.



"Leon in the tractor," Great Easton, Market Harborough, UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.





Brexit offered the UK government a unique opportunity to fundamentally reform agricultural policy outside the European Union's Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). Some stakeholders—both for and against Brexit—saw an opportunity to create a new scheme that would benefit the environment and farmers' livelihoods. The government started a process of co-designing the new policy, including the voices of multiple actors invested in the British agricultural landscape, to help deliver a "Green Brexit" (DEFRA, 2018).

The new Environmental Land Management (ELM) policy is under development, and the previous system of subsidies based on the amount of land owned is gradually being phased out as of January 2021 (DEFRA, 2020, 6). The ELM supports farmers whose activities produce "public goods," that is, clean air, clean water, healthy soil, thriving wildlife, and measures to mitigate environmental hazards (DEFRA, 2018, 12). This represents the most important agricultural transition in England since the end of World War II in 1945 and the adoption of CAP in 1973.

One benefit of co-design in a policy-making context is that the process itself aims to "generate feelings of involvement and ownership and to foster shared understandings and a common language between stakeholders and policymakers" (Tsouvalis et al., forthcoming). However, if the information shared between policymakers and stakeholders is not clear, it can also create confusion and tension. In fact, stakeholders have reported feelings of fatigue and lack of faith in the process (Lyon and Little, 2022).

As part of the Agri-Environmental Governance Post-Brexit research project, I went to the Great Yorkshire Show in July 2021 and interviewed 15 farmers to find out what they thought about the ELM policy.¹ The interviews revealed a shared sense of uncertainty triggered by the lack of clarity about how the new policy would affect their farming activities and businesses. The substantial changes on how subsidies will be allocated, in combination with news about possible new trade deals with Australia and the United States,² make farmers feel that the future of their livelihoods is in jeopardy. In addition, in the last few decades large-scale farming has expanded, reducing the viability of small family-run farms (Laoire, 2002) and putting their very existence at stake. Aware that the new policy will affect their livelihoods, Morris Charlton, one of the farmers I met at the Great Yorkshire Show, put it clearly: *We do not know the details, and uncertainty breeds anxiety and worry. Another farmer told me: We know the direction it's going in, but we don't know the details, and the devil is in the details.*

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Cautiously optimistic, a few weeks later, organic farmer Ian Boyd shared his feelings about the current agricultural transition:

Do I feel uncertain for the future? I'm hopeful. I mean, in some ways, it's not for me. It's for my daughter to take it on, but I'm trying to do everything I can to promote this type of extensive farming that cares for the wildlife. I'm in a lucky position—I meet up with government ministers, I meet up with DEFRA officials, and it gives me an opportunity to put our case. If I couldn't do that, it'd be even more frustrating. I'm not sure I'm going to succeed. So, it won't be for the lack of trying.

Because of the fragmented nature of the fieldwork I conducted—short visits to different farmers and events—I used photography as a strategy to bring together farmers' experiences and engagement with the current policy co-design into a coherent visual and textual narrative. While text is particularly good at providing context, explanation, and analysis, photography can evoke abstract feelings and collaboratively engage participants in the process of representation (Ferrarini and Scaldaferrì, 2020, 15–16). The narrative potential of the image–text sequence found cohesion when I started pursuing images representing the feelings of uncertainty that farmers expressed in our conversations.

To capture an abstract feeling like uncertainty, I followed the farmer's gaze. If the person photographed does not look straight at the camera but gazes out of the frame, the image gains an element of uncertainty and the viewer may shift their attention “away from the subject and on to what they may be thinking” (Carroll, 2015, 50). Here, by attuning the aesthetics of the images to the uncertainty that farmers voiced, I was able to explore the expressive (Edwards, 1997), promiscuous (Pink, 2004), and speculative (Chio and Cox, 2016) qualities of photography to tell a story. I aimed to generate an uncertain feeling in the viewer who may wonder: What is happening? Where is this road leading? What are they thinking?

Shooting portraits also opened up space for collaboration and allowed the farmers to express embodied resilience and determination. In fact, this is an important attitude in the face of agricultural policy changes—farmers are well aware of the importance of their work as food producers, yet, in the transition to ELM, they feel that their identity as food producers is at stake. Nonetheless, some farmers have already embraced the

Previous spread: “Dust,” Great Easton, Market Harborough, UK, 2021. Photo by Jose Luis Fajardo-Escoffié.

principles of environmental farming as laid out under the new scheme (Cusworth and Dodsworth, 2021).

In this way, my aesthetic choices were “anthropologically attuned” (Sutherland, 2016, 119) and allowed me to explore the language of still photography within the wider research project. Consequently, I intentionally created photographs beyond an illustrative role and constructed a visual narrative based on “sensory evocation” (Ferrarini and Scaldaferrri, 2020, 169).

The decisions I made to attune the photographic language with the ethnographic insights is where the “anthropological knowledge inheres” (Dietrich, 2018). In making and editing this photo essay, the knowledge generated was based not only on “the crafting, slicing, and juxtaposing of material” (Dietrich, 2018) but also on the work involved in integrating the ethnographic insights into the aesthetics of the images and, therefore, in the process of making the photographs.

Endnotes

1. The interviews were made into short videos that are available here: <https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/exhibits/talking-environmental-land-management>.
2. At the time of writing in March 2022, the UK government announced a new trade deal with New Zealand, eliminating all tariffs for beef, lamb, and dairy in the next 6–15 years (*Farming Today*, episode 01/03/2022, March 1, 2022, accessed 01/03/2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0014x8g>).

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