

Rural Report

A monthly newsletter focusing on issues of rural life and farming of relevance to the work of the Church of England in the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Information is drawn from organisations connected with the countryside (in its widest sense) within Suffolk and beyond.

The newsletter will produce brief reports giving factual information on a range of issues. Items may be of general interest or provide opportunity for prayer.

If more details are needed on any of the topics mentioned, contact brianrobertchester@gmail.com or call 01572 757600



Issue 133: April 2024

It will have not escaped our attention that the weather has been less than kind so far this year – with farmers suffering from flooded fields, unworkable soil and inability to carry out many day-to-day activities. A headline in the March edition of the regional magazine *Anglia Farmer* catches the mood: *Tough decisions lie ahead for flood-hit crops*. A survey by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board has revealed that the UK wheat area could fall by 15 per cent; barley by 22 per cent and intentions to plant more spring crops to ‘catch up’ are now in question as rain continues to be forecast. The area of oil seed rape is estimated to fall by 28 per cent with poor growing conditions in the autumn and winter being compounded by the wet spring. The *East Anglian Daily Times* reported that sheep farmer Chris Reeks, after losing four ewes in the floods on land at the Euston Estate that followed storm Babet last October, was now facing, along with many other sheep farmers, a challenging lambing season.

All poultry keepers will be legally required to register their birds under new legislation that comes into force in the autumn. Keepers must also review and update their register each year. The changes are designed to help manage potential disease outbreaks, such as avian influenza and Newcastle disease, and limit spread.

Five leading farming organisations have jointly commissioned a national independent review of all farm assurance schemes. It will consult the industry to see how the assurance system can be re-shaped to meet the needs of food producers while underpinning delivery of a high-quality UK food system. Red Tractor will be among the current schemes to be assessed.

The Sustainable Farming Incentive is a scheme introduced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs with the aim of encouraging sustainable production of food alongside protection of the environment. A recent decision to limit the amount of land a farmer can opt into the scheme has brought contrasting reactions from the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association. All new applicants will be limited to placing a maximum of 25 per cent of their acreage into use that takes it out of direct food production. Explaining the move, the department said that ‘while there has been only limited evidence to date of farmers entering large amounts of their land into actions that take away food production, some of these actions were being used more than intended in a small number of cases’.

NFU deputy president David Exwood welcomed the announcement, which he said ‘sets out to achieve a greater balance’ between supporting food production while enhancing the environment. The CLA has warned that the move could reduce the scheme’s appeal and hit take-up. CLA president Victoria Vyvyan said: ‘Food production and nature are not binary choices. We have to do both. We understand the Minister’s need to look at some of the individual actions again, but the principle of the scheme is the right one.’

Revd Alison Alder, associate priest in the Blyth Valley Team Benefice, has been appointed as Diocesan Environment Officer. Alison has gained experience in the environment working as the Eco Champion for the Waveney and Blyth Deanery.

“We need to show people that farming isn’t the slow, old-fashioned industry they might think it is but a place where highly skilled people are applying their skills to a dynamic issue that’s pivotal to a healthy, sustainable, and forward-thinking society.” Stephen Jacob, chief executive of the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture.

Home Farm Nacton, Ipswich is reported to be leading the way in driverless tractors using artificial intelligence. Andrew Williams has two solar-powered Farmdroids and a Robotti machine which are starting to change how they farm on the 1,170ha operation on the Orwell Park Estate. Although they are on a steep learning curve, the machines are already making an impact, he explained. *East Anglian Daily Times*

This newsletter was initiated under the guidance of the Diocesan Rural Affairs Group set up as a means of identifying current rural issues and considering how the church should respond.