

# 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, please contact Brian Chester at [bc@bcnewslink.com](mailto:bc@bcnewslink.com) or call 01572 757600



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**Leaders of county councils** are calling on the Government to address the lack of affordable homes in rural areas of England. Philip Atkins, County Councils Network spokesman for housing, planning, and infrastructure, said: 'We have long been concerned that house prices in country areas are becoming increasingly unaffordable, with millions of young people locked out of home ownership and the situation rapidly worsening.' *Telegraph*

**Average cost** of a house in rural England's is reported to be around £100,000 more than urban areas outside London,

**Robots**, vertical farms and virtual fencing are set to be part of the British farming landscape, according to an NFU report the Future of Food 2040. The report looks to how Britain will evolve socially, technologically and environmentally. It explores how changing trends will impact on food production, what we will be eating, how we will buy it, and how food will be produced. <https://www.nfuonline.com/news/bulletin/nfu-publishes-future-of-food-report/>

**Defra Secretary** of State Michael Gove has signalled his support for a commission to ensure Government upholds the high standards of British food production post-Brexit. "There is concern that standards might be compromised in pursuit of future trade deals. From the Prime Minister down there's a determination to ensure that won't happen," he said.

**More dairy farmers** left the industry at the start of this year than at any time since March 2007, according to the Food Standards Agency figures. In total, there were 106 fewer producers registered in England and Wales at the start of February compared with the previous month. In the four months since November 2018, 222 dairy farmers, equating to 2.4% of the industry, left the sector. *Farmers Weekly*

**Views are being sought** on the use of gene-editing technologies in animals. An on-line survey is focused on public perceptions of gene editing and attitudes to eating meat from an animal in which the DNA has been altered. Responses will be become part research at the University of Edinburgh's Roslin Institute, which has already used the technology to enhance specific disease resistance in pigs. [https://abacusblo.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/ge\\_consumerwtp\\_v2](https://abacusblo.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/ge_consumerwtp_v2)

**British-grown** potatoes, vegetables and fruit are at risk as growers struggle to cope with extreme and unpredictable weather, made more likely by climate change according to The Climate Coalition. Apple growers lost around 25% of their harvest in 2017 due to unexpectedly late frosts. Carrot (down a reported 25-30%) and onion yields (reportedly down 40% on a normal year) were hampered in 2018 by warmer than average temperatures. Potato yields were down on average 20% in England and Wales in 2018 compared to the previous season, making it the fourth smallest harvest since 1960.

<https://www.theclimatecoalition.org/recipefordisaster/>

**A campaign** by the British Veterinary Association and the RSPCA has resulted in the Food Standards Agency releasing figures from its 2018 slaughterhouse survey which reveal that more than 94 million cattle, sheep and poultry were slaughtered without being stunned first with almost a quarter of the sheep meat being exported. The BVA says the current derogation in the law only allows non-stun slaughter for religious purposes in the UK.

**Social Farms & Gardens** (previously Care Farming UK) and Thrive (a charity that uses gardening and horticulture to 'change lives'), have been selected to expand care farming services across England to help improve the mental health of disadvantaged children and adults by bringing them closer to nature.

**A series** of 'infographics' has been produced by the NFU to 'set the record straight about how farmers protect the environment, care for their animals and provide nutritious food for the nation.' Go to:

<https://www.nfuonline.com/news/latest-news/setting-the-record-straight/>

*This newsletter is prepared under the guidance of the Diocesan Rural Affairs Group set up as a means of identifying emerging rural issues and considering how the church should respond.*

An agronomist based in north Suffolk

highlights issues of concern.

The agricultural supply industry has been busy preparing to cope with disruption that could ensue come March the 29<sup>th</sup>. Much of the supply industry operates on a 'just in time' principle, so many of companies have been packing warehouses and renting extra space in anticipation. On the whole the industry is ready to roll with some suppliers reporting that 90 per cent of their spring products are now across the Channel and in the UK.

So far 2019 has been notably dry. January only recorded half its normal average rainfall and February, known for 'fill dyke', was actually one of the driest months of the year in East Anglia. So we may well be looking at a potential water crisis. Many larger farms which irrigate rely on being able to pump water from nearby rivers into holding reservoirs during the winter months. This is overseen by the Environment Agency and only allowed once the rivers have reached a certain 'flow rate'. In many cases these flow rates have not been met and many reservoirs remain empty or far below their required level. On top of this, some extraction licenses have been halved through measures brought in by the Environment Agency under the 'River Basin Management Plan'.

This legislation was introduced during 2015 and is designed to protect the abstraction water supplies to the public water main.

So, what's the potential impact of all of that? Well for those growing salads, potatoes, carrots, onions, herbs, - irrigation plans are already having to be changed. If water becomes an even tighter resource expect some expensive veg in the supermarkets!

As I write, the NFU Sugar Board is meeting to consider the future of this important crop. Twelve of the 19 EU countries which grow sugar beet have announced that they will continue to support the use of neonicotinoid seed dressings on their crop. With the UK ban on these materials now firmly in place this puts our growers in an unenviable position, potentially unable to grow financially competitive crops due to the risk of virus diseases that can threaten crop yields by up to 47 per cent. And in the background is a marked fall in the world price of sugar by almost 50 per cent. No one can predict the level to which farm yields will be affected, but with British Sugar's parent company (ABF) posting huge losses in profitability for this sector, the eyes of many are watching carefully.

**SP – March 6, 2019**