

NFU Scotland Manifesto

for the Scottish Parliament Elections 2026



**A Profitable, Sustainable
and Resilient Future for
Scottish Farming, Crofting
and Rural Scotland**

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Foreword

Scotland's farmers and crofters are the backbone of our rural economy, our national identity, and our food security.

The skilled people who work across the industry manage more than three-quarters of Scotland's land area and produce high-quality food, shape our landscapes, safeguard biodiversity and nature, play a vital role in climate ambitions, and underpin the social and economic fabric of rural Scotland.

But the next decade will be defined by profound change - including the implementation of a new support structure to deliver new policy objectives, increasing climate pressures, labour shortages, higher costs of production, global market volatility, and the ongoing need to attract and retain young people into the sector.

The next Scottish Government has a critical choice.

Either invest in Scotland's food producers and all that active farming and crofting underpin or risk irreversible loss of productive capacity, rural employment, food security and environmental outcomes. With the right support and policy from the next Scottish Government, our industry can flourish and unlock economic growth.

This Manifesto sets out NFU Scotland's clear, practical and deliverable asks for the next Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament. It builds on NFU Scotland's Policy Strategy, and its five themed sub-strategies. Together, they set out a clear roadmap for delivering a profitable, sustainable and resilient future for Scottish agriculture.

It also represents the priorities of farmers and crofters across every sector and every region - from extensive upland livestock systems and island crofts to lowland dairy and beef finisher units, arable businesses, horticulture, poultry, pigs and mixed farms.

It also delivers on the priorities of Scotland - not least in terms of economic growth and tackling climate change.

It is a plan that places high-quality food production from profitable and sustainable farms and crofts at the centre of national policy, partnership and practical delivery as the route to, and measure of, success.

Scottish agriculture generates a gross output of around **£4.6 billion annually.**



Opportunity and Responsibility

Scottish agriculture contributes billions to the economy, supports tens of thousands of jobs, sustains rural communities, and provides safe, affordable, high-quality Scottish food to consumers at home and beyond.

Yet our sector faces challenges that threaten its viability: soaring input costs, climate volatility, regulatory complexity, limited rural infrastructure, and uncertainty over long-term government support.

The next Scottish Government has an opportunity - and a responsibility - to build a framework that supports profitable, productive farming and crofting while delivering climate and nature goals with farmers and crofters, not against them.

In 2024, farm output from beef reached **£1.07billion**

Scotland's farmers and crofters are ready to lead, but require:

- Long-term financial certainty
- A fair and practical transition to the new support framework
- Policies that protect and enhance food security and supply chains
- Investment in skills, infrastructure and innovation
- Regulation that is workable and proportionate to encourage financial sustainability

NFU Scotland's Manifesto provides the blueprint. Both the next Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament will carry the responsibility to work in partnership with NFU Scotland, and the wider agricultural and rural sector, to provide the opportunity for farming and crofting to play their unique and pivotal role in delivering for Scotland.

Funding: Certainty to Invest and Deliver

Why long-term funding matters

Agricultural businesses and enterprises operate on cycles that span years, not months. Livestock breeding, cropping rotations, infrastructure investment, soil management, and agri-environment delivery all require stable long-term planning.



Our Asks

→ An increased, multi-annual and ring-fenced agricultural budget

The next Scottish Government must commit to an increased, multi-annual and ring-fenced agricultural budget that is protected, transparent and inflation-proofed. Without this, farms and crofts cannot plan for production, invest in technology, meet environmental targets, or weather input cost and output price volatility.

→ Support must remain focused on active farming and crofting

A significant majority of rural support must remain attached to active agricultural management, through new direct support measures. This is needed to ensure the actions of those who manage the land and livestock, operate agricultural businesses, and guarantee Scotland continues to supply high-quality food while also helping to meet climate and nature ambitions, are directly supported.

Scottish agriculture employs around **67,400 people** – making it the key employer in rural Scotland.

Yet Scottish farmers and crofters currently face year-to-year budget uncertainty that undermines confidence and investment. In addition, much of the capital infrastructure needed to meet required production and environmental standards are high cost items in a low profit margin industry

→ A dedicated capital investment programme

Separate from annual direct support payments, Scottish agriculture also needs a coordinated capital investment programme that is flexible and adaptable to changes in technology that enables transformational change to deliver all that is being asked of active farmers and crofters.

This should include on-farm investments to drive efficiencies and build resilience, enable new entrants and young farmers to thrive, and enable diversification into renewables, agri-tourism, etc. It should also extend beyond the farm-gate into investment in food processing, marketing and co-operation to shorten supply chains and add value for the primary producer.

→ Transparent accounting and outcome reporting

The next Scottish Government should publish annual statements detailing how agricultural funds are used and what outcomes are achieved at a national level, as part of the monitoring and evaluation in the Rural Support Plan 2026-2030, but without tying farmers in excessive paperwork or monitoring burdens.

A Fair Transition to New Agricultural Support

Why it matters

Scotland's new post-CAP agricultural support system will be delivered through the four-tier framework established under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024.



Our Asks

→ Co-design, not consultation

The next Scottish Government must work in partnership with the industry at every stage of scheme design and implementation – including new eligibility rules, delivery measures and structures, compliance requirements, and monitoring and verification.

Policy that is not properly co-designed risks being unworkable, meaning little or no delivery of intended outcomes – but significant risks for business viability.

→ A gradual transition that avoids cliff edges

The shift from legacy schemes to the new tiers of support, especially Tiers 1 and 2 which will make up direct support, must be phased to give businesses time to adapt. Direct support for active farmers and crofters must remain the core of agricultural support during the years of transition, ensuring certainty and stability while environmental and efficiency-based measures are developed and tested.

83% of Scots believe government should provide targeted support for farming and crofting and food production

While NFU Scotland welcomes the direction of travel, the pace, design and delivery of the transition will determine whether Scotland maintains productive capacity and delivers the intended policy outcomes or suffers the destabilisation of farming and crofting and the dismantling of rural communities that would follow.

→ Introduce practical definitions

New definitions of 'active farmer' and 'active farming' must be agreed and implemented to ensure direct support is targeted at those taking the risks, managing our land and livestock, and delivering the desired outcomes around food, climate, nature, and people.

The definition of 'eligible land' must also be revised to recognise and reward the array of features in the Scotland's agricultural landscape that clearly deliver for today's policy goals.

Eligibility must also not exclude genuine producers because of technicalities such as scale or diversified income. Definitions and eligibility rules must be fair, simple and grounded in the realities of Scottish farming and crofting.

→ Simplified compliance

Compliance must be proportionate and risk-based, using digital tools where appropriate but avoiding complexity that punishes smaller businesses or crofts – the costs of compliance must be proportionate and fair. Equally, verification and inspection processes must be simplified for all - reducing risk and cost to better ensure outcomes are delivered.

Food Security and Supply Chain Fairness

Why food security matters

A secure, resilient domestic food supply is a national priority. Scotland cannot rely on increasingly fragile global supply chains, nor allow its own production to decline through policy decisions or market failures. Equally, the value of Scottish food exports to economic growth and prosperity cannot be overlooked.



Our Asks

→ A national food production target

As presented in Scotland Food and Drink's ambition of £30 Billion by 2030, the next Scottish Government should adopt a measurable target to increase the output of key food products in which Scotland has comparative advantage including beef, lamb, cereals, dairy, potatoes, soft fruits and vegetables.

→ Fairness in the supply chain

The next Scottish Government should work with the UK Government, processors, retailers and NFU Scotland to bring about mandatory transparency in contracts, prompt payment standards, fairer treatment from processors and retailers, the strengthening of producer organisations and co-operatives, and support for local abattoirs, processing and storage facilities.

During 2025, **50% of vegetables** in major supermarkets were imported, despite domestic availability.

→ Scottish produce in public procurement

The next Scottish Government must act to ensure that schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons prioritise Scottish food through procurement rules that support local producers and simplify bidding processes for SMEs and co-operatives.

There must also be a commitment to transparency across the food system and supply chain so that consumers are able to make informed decisions – including a review of labelling regulations.

→ Market development and exports

There must be greater commitment to export promotion, branding, market intelligence and trade missions to help Scottish produce access international markets while retaining value at home.

The next Scottish Government must also invest resources to help realise the full potential of Scotland's already renowned food and drink sector – including continued and increased support for Scotland Food and Drink in order to achieve aspirations around the growth in value of the food and drinks sector.

Climate and Nature: Delivering Through Farming and Crofting

The challenge and the opportunity

Farmers and crofters are essential to delivering climate mitigation and adaptation, nature recovery, and improved water and soil outcomes. But these must be pursued in ways that protect productive capacity and recognise practical realities.



Our Asks

→ A balanced national land use strategy

Scotland needs a coherent land use policy, with agricultural production at its core, that reconciles and integrates food production with actions in relation to biodiversity and habitat restoration, peatland restoration and woodland creation, as well as flood risk management, renewable energy generation, and rural housing and community development.

It is essential that land use planning is not about binary choices but recognises optimal and multiple land use - including safeguarding Scotland's prime and productive agricultural land. Farmers and crofters must be key partners, not passive recipients.

40% of Scotland's agricultural land can be classified as High Nature Value farmland.

Species management challenges - from deer, geese and beavers to predators such as sea eagles and badgers - also increasingly affect farm and croft viability, including the emotional well-being of many farmers and crofters, and biodiversity outcomes.

→ A balanced approach to species management

For a shared approach to work, the next Scottish Government must work with farmers and crofters to establish effective and pragmatic management frameworks for species such as sea eagles, geese and beavers to fully recognise and account for all agricultural impacts - physical, emotional and financial.

To ensure that, farmers and crofters will need robust and timely licensing regimes for intervention where species cause significant agricultural damage.

In addition, funding for species management will be critical. It is vital that the next Scottish Government commits sufficient funding for all appropriate intervention, including population control where necessary. Furthermore, there must be a commitment to no further species reintroductions.

→ Payments for environmental actions

The delivery of environmental outcomes is critical to Scotland's future prosperity. However, such public goods and benefits cannot be sustained by private costs carried by individuals and their agricultural enterprises.

Nor can support be focused only on outcomes alone. Support must be targeted at the actions and measures that farmers and crofters undertake.

Environmental delivery must be rewarded and so measures aimed at delivering for climate and nature must be accessible to active farmers and crofters, properly funded, and flexible and sensitive to regional and sectoral differences.

→ Protect productive land

Scotland has very limited Prime Agricultural Land and our other productive agricultural land is being squeezed by multiple policy-driven demands.

The likes of peatland restoration and tree planting must not displace active farming and crofting to the detriment of food production, agricultural businesses, and rural economies and communities. All policy levers relating to land use must be evidence-based and fully account for any opportunity costs of compromising agricultural land use.

→ Support low-carbon farming technologies

If Scottish agriculture is to transition to low-carbon production systems, primarily through emissions reductions the next Scottish Government must invest support in the likes of slurry and manure management, the decarbonisation of agricultural machinery, farm-scale renewable energy, precision nutrient applications, improved genetics and breeding, and soil health programmes.

Such technologies, operating at scale across different sectors of Scottish agriculture, can drive significant efficiency gains – driving more resilient and profitable agricultural businesses whilst making a significant contribution to climate ambitions.

→ Reward the public goods from upland, hill and crofting systems

Scotland's 'less favoured areas' will continue to require tailored and targeted support to reflect the unique public benefits these systems provide – not only the environmental benefits of extensive grazing systems but critically the socio-economic outcomes of farming and crofting in Scotland's more challenging areas.

The next Scottish Government must commit specific funding to underpin farming and crofting in such areas and all they contribute – especially in terms of the social fabric of rural communities reliant on active farming and crofting.





World-Class Animal and Plant Health

Why it matters

With our changing climate comes greater risk from disease and outbreaks can threaten livelihoods, welfare and trade. Scotland must remain a leader in animal and plant health standards.



Our Asks

→ Strengthen surveillance and rapid response capacity

The next Scottish Government must invest in early detection, laboratory capacity, emergency response mechanisms and fair compensation for mandatory culls or restrictions.

→ Address rural veterinary shortages

A lack of veterinary capacity, especially in some remoter locations, is having a detrimental impact on certain sectors. A robust strategy to address this must be brought forward by the next Scottish Government and should include incentives for rural veterinary practices.

Employment in the pig sector in Scotland is **over 2,200 jobs.**

→ Border and import controls

Scotland must maintain strong biosecurity at all points of entry to protect crops, livestock and market access. The next Scottish Government must work closely with the UK Government and its agencies to ensure that robust and effective border and import controls are in place.

Innovation, Research and Technology

Why it matters

Through its renowned research institutions, Scotland's agricultural research base is world-class. Farmers and crofters need applied research, practical innovation and technologies that can be deployed at scale and at pace.

Around 90% of the spring barley used to produce Scotch Whisky is sourced in Scotland.



Our Asks

→ Greater investment in applied research

The next Scottish Government must increase funding to Scotland's agricultural and land-based research institutes so they can deliver pragmatic and practical change at farm and enterprise level to drive both economic and environmental improvement – not least economic growth and climate change.

→ A science-based approach to genetic technologies and precision breeding

With research institutes pioneering genetic techniques, Scotland should be at the forefront of using science in practice to deliver more resilient food production systems that also yield proven environmental benefits.

NFU Scotland is asking the next Scottish Government to introduce legislation and adopt a balanced, evidence-led and proactive approach to gene editing for traits such as disease resistance, improved feed efficiency, and reduced inputs. This would ensure Scotland remains competitive while safeguarding its reputation for the quality and provenance of its food products.

→ Universal digital connectivity

In today's world, it is essential that all businesses and communities in rural and remote areas have full and highly effective mobile and broadband coverage. This is a must for all rural and island areas to unlock digital agriculture, remote working, and education.

People, Skills and the Next Generation

Why people matter

Without skilled and able people, farms and crofts cannot operate. Without young people, the industry has no future. These are also the people that sustain our rural communities and will carry forward the culture and heritage of rural life in Scotland.

The potato industry in Scotland employs over **2,000 people.**



Our Asks

→ A New Entrant and Young Farmer Package

The next Scottish Government must prioritise and deliver a bespoke and structured programme of support for new entrants and young farmers. This should include capital grants for business planning and training support, succession and joint venture incentives, and access to land through innovative leasing or share farming.

→ Strengthened agricultural education and apprenticeships

For too long, specific education, training and apprenticeships relating to agriculture and the wider land-based sector have been lacking. That shortfall in meaningful investment risks the future of rural businesses and rural communities. The next Scottish Government must provide investment in agricultural colleges and vocational training, on-farm apprenticeships, and continuous professional development.

A national agricultural workforce strategy is also required to address shortages, promote careers, and support employers.

Labour, Migration and Workforce Stability

The challenge

Recently, seasonal and permanent labour shortages have had a major impact on fruit and vegetable growing, dairy farming, livestock care, and food storage, processing, and distribution. Scotland's food system cannot operate without able and willing people.



Our Asks

→ A Scotland-fit seasonal worker scheme

NFU Scotland urges closer collaboration between the next Scottish Government and the UK Government to secure sufficient numbers, and at the right times, of seasonal workers. This will require clear, stable rules for those employing seasonal workers. Equally, the existing Fair Work conditions for all employees must not compromise Scotland's competitive position in the UK's single market. There must also be long-term guarantees to support investment in horticulture and other more labour-intensive sectors.

→ Domestic skills pipeline

The next Scottish Government must help ensure that careers in farming, crofting and other rural enterprises are effectively promoted and supported through education, training pathways and incentives for rural employment.

→ Best practice in employment

The next Scottish Government should support all rural employers, especially in a farm business context, to provide accessible and meaningful support, high-quality accommodation, training, and the Fair Work conditions applied to businesses in receipt of capital investments from the Scottish Government and enterprise agencies.

→ Dismantle the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board (SAWB)

Given the continuous move towards a unified approach to pay and conditions across all sectors of the Scottish economy, including the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and the Fair Work conditions that apply in Scotland, the terms and conditions offered to employees in the Scottish agricultural sector must now be brought into line with the rest of the economy.

The next Scottish Government should disband the SAWB immediately and allow the sector to operate to the same standards as other parts of the Scottish and UK economies – not least to avoid being placed at a competitive disadvantage within the UK single market.

Around 10% of agricultural land is used for crop production; employing up to 20,000 people.



Regulation that Works

Why it matters

It is critical that farmers and crofters operate to the highest of standards to ensure confidence and integrity in terms of the produce entering every supply chain, as well as the environmental and animal welfare standards that allows Scottish agriculture to stand tall.

Scotland's farmers and crofters do support and do deliver high standards. However, regulatory standards, contract requirements and farm assurance are often duplicated, disproportionate, or confusing.



Our Asks

→ A commitment to regulatory simplification

The next Scottish Government should conduct systematic reviews of all farm-related regulations, not least all the existing cross-compliance relating to direct support payments, with a view to reducing unnecessary administrative risks and costs for farmers, crofters and the Scottish Government and its agencies – such as SEPA and NatureScot.

→ Consistent, risk-based enforcement

Farmers and crofters continuously face the risk of disproportionate penalties for minor administrative errors. The next Scottish Government should review the legacy EU rules and requirements around support payments that are now within Scots law via the Agriculture (EU Retained Law and Data) (Scotland) Act 2020 – especially those relating to cross-compliance, inspections and penalties.

Whilst audit and verification are necessary, inspections and penalties must be proportionate and focus on genuine risks.

→ Efficient and fair inspections

Farm and croft businesses are inspected and audited for a variety of different reasons and by a variety of different agencies and organisations. Inspections should be coordinated, transparent and designed to support compliance and with a distinct aim of avoiding duplication and reducing costs for all.

Scotland accounts for **some 12% of UK egg production** - approximately **13.7 million per week**.

Rural Infrastructure, Transport and Community Services

Why it matters

Poor roads and unreliable ferry services, limited broadband, fragile local services and inadequate food processing capacity, including abattoirs, in many parts of Scotland affect every aspect of farm and rural business viability.

Without fit-for-purpose connectivity, capacity and fundamental rural services (including health care, schools, and amenities), many rural areas of Scotland face long term economic and social decline.



Our Asks

→ Universal rural broadband and mobile coverage

The next Scottish Government must complete delivery of full connectivity to rural communities and islands - essential in the digital age for effective business administration and community resilience.

→ Investment in transport infrastructure

The transport infrastructure of many parts of rural Scotland is challenged. There is a critical need for an efficient, effective and reliable rural transport network of roads, rail and ferries. However, significant investment is urgently needed to ensure rural Scotland has the best and future-proofed transport infrastructure to meet the needs of people, farm machinery, livestock transport and critical supply chains.

A vibrant agricultural sector is the key to thriving rural communities. However, in turn, that relies on rural infrastructure and connectivity delivered by the Scottish Government, local authorities, and agencies.

Scottish farmers and crofters support thousands of supply chain companies, with over **320,000 people involved** in Scottish agricultural activities.

→ Processing and supply chain infrastructure

Scotland's farmers and crofters produce the highest quality food and are the first link in a food and drinks sector with a commanding international reputation and which delivers so much for Scotland's future economic prosperity.

However, it is also clear that primary production is being seriously compromised by a lack of critical storage, processing and distribution infrastructure at both local and national levels. This must be addressed by the next Scottish Government via urgent and sufficient investment in the likes of local abattoirs, cold storage and packing facilities, grain and feed infrastructure, and machinery rings and co-operatives.

→ Rural housing and community vitality

The planning policies of Scotland - at both local and national levels - should enable the delivery of appropriate developments, not least to enable rural areas to meet affordable rural housing needs for farm and other rural workers, young families and key professionals.

Supporting Crofting, Upland and Hill Farming

Why it matters

The extensive grazing systems of active farming and crofting in Scotland's crofting counties and wider less favoured areas maintain so many of our most iconic landscapes, while delivering biodiversity benefits, sustaining fragile communities and preserving cultural heritage. But these areas also face unique socio-economic challenges.

Over 50% of agricultural land is dedicated to upland sheep, mixed sheep & beef cattle farming, grazing from this land benefits insects, plants, and birds.



Our Asks

→ Tailored support

Crofts, upland and hill farms must have bespoke, accessible support schemes that reflect their production systems and higher operating costs. This is about recognising the specific needs of extensive grazing systems and valuing their environmental and socio-economic contribution.

The new agricultural support system, delivered by effective funding and measures under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, must recognise and reward the full contribution such systems make to policy goals around food, climate, nature, and people.

→ Reward public goods

Crofting and upland systems deliver an abundance of ecosystem services. The incentives and payment rates, as well as proportionality of compliance, must align to reflect the true cost of delivering these benefits.

Over 5 million hectares, or roughly 86%, of Scotland's agricultural land is designated as Less Favoured Areas (LFA).

Trade, Standards and Market Access

Why it matters

Scotland's food and drink sector is world-renowned. The hard won reputation for high quality, integrity and welfare relies on farmers and crofters adhering to the highest of standards. Commodity markets and trade deals must not undermine them.

1.51 billion litres of milk are produced in Scotland annually – equivalent to 604 Olympic-sized swimming pools.



Our Asks

→ Defend Scottish standards

The next Scottish Government must work with the UK Government to ensure existing and any new trade agreements meet equivalence in the environmental, welfare and food safety standards of Scottish produce. Imports produced to lower standards must not undercut Scottish farmers and crofters that often carry higher costs to ensure such standards are met in the interests of consumers and the environment.

As part of this, the next Scottish Government must ensure that the interests of Scottish agriculture are properly represented by the UK Government when deals impacting agriculture and the wider food and drink sector are negotiated.

→ Export support and SPS capacity

The next Scottish Government must ensure it continues to invest in the export growth of Scotland's iconic food products – both in terms of existing markets in the rest of the UK and abroad and potential new market opportunities. This means specific investment in certification capacity, logistics support, and market promotion for Scottish products.

Effective engagement with the UK Government, to ensure the needs and requirements of Scotland are considered as the new Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement is negotiated with the EU, is also essential. The potential reset of trading relations with the EU is a significant opportunity for Scottish agriculture and the food and drink sector.

Conclusion: A Partnership for Scotland's Future

Farmers and crofters are the primary producers of the Scottish food and drink sector which has a current record turnover of **£19 billion.**

This NFU Scotland Manifesto is intended for the next Scottish Government and Parliament.

It is founded on a simple principle: Scotland cannot drive economic growth and climate and nature ambitions, alongside thriving rural communities, without a productive, resilient and, ultimately, profitable farming and crofting sector.

Farmers and crofters are ready to lead Scotland into the next parliamentary term from 2026 to 2031 and beyond - producing high-quality food, tackling climate change, delivering for nature, and supporting rural life.

We need a Scottish Government and Parliament that will:

- Back farmers and crofters with long-term funding
- Work with the sector through genuine co-design
- Provide support with investment and practical regulation
- Champion our food producers at home and abroad

The next Scottish Government and Parliament must work in partnership with Scotland's farmers, crofters and wider rural communities to secure Scotland's future, strengthen rural Scotland, and reward the people who steward our land and produce our food. Our rural economy and communities depend on it.



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