

Regional rural land use: a time for fresh thinking?

As the English regions prepare for their first Integrated Regional Strategies, what role could, and should, rural land play in the regeneration of both rural – and urban – areas? And with concerns over food and energy security, public health, and climate change rising high on the political agenda, is it time to think again about what rural land is for?



Policy and Practice Notes

The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is a UK-wide research programme carrying out interdisciplinary research on the multiple challenges facing rural areas. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council, with additional funding from the Scottish Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

In England, if not the UK as a whole, less consideration has been given to rural, compared with urban land use, and the policy framework has recognised only a very limited range of the opportunities that rural land presents.

- **Since the Second World War, planning policy in the countryside has largely been about constraining development while protecting green belts and nationally important landscapes and safeguarding agricultural land**
- **Rural policy has been seen as an adjunct to agricultural policy both in the UK and within Europe – if farming was successful then rural areas would flourish**

What are the new regional strategies and what will they do?

By 2010 or 2011, strategic plans that join up land use planning (including housing and transport) and economic development will be in place in the English regions. Regional development agencies and boards of local authority leaders will be responsible for these strategies.

- Strategies will build on experience of producing regional spatial strategies and regional economic strategies
- They will set out a 15-20 year framework for achieving sustainable economic growth and meeting housing targets
- Strategies are expected to address climate change and renewable energy as key areas of policy



Should the new regional strategies address rural land use?

Regional strategies must cover both urban and rural areas, and whilst rural land use isn't singled out specifically:

- Rural land has significant potential to increase its contribution to a low carbon future:
 - through the management of floodplains to help with climate change adaptation
 - as a provider of the raw materials for renewable energy such as biomass
 - as a sequester of carbon
- Rural areas have untapped economic potential:
 - More rural land may be used to provide housing and jobs in the countryside
 - There are opportunities to develop, small-scale, energy generation, such as on-farm anaerobic digestion, in addition to large scale infrastructure such as wind farms and hydro-electric schemes
- But there are also challenges:
 - Rural land management will need to make its own contribution to reducing CO₂ and move away from its dependence on fossil fuels
 - More crops and livestock will need to be produced with reduced oil-derived inputs such as fertilizer



What are the implications for regional policymakers?

The image of rural land needs a makeover. We cannot go on regarding it simply as a means of food production, with the environment as an expensive by-product. We have to realise its potential as a tool for economic recovery and growth, capable of delivering a range of products and services needed by society. The recession has thrown the economic dice up in the air: the uncertainty over how they might land, coupled with growing political and civic unease, is making a compelling case for a new economic paradigm, in which the environment and land are key.

What are the barriers and opportunities for rural land use planning within regional strategies?

Regional strategies cannot afford to leave rural land out of the wider vision for regional development and plans. There may be barriers:

- Rural land has been largely outside the planning system
- It is often seen as equating with farming and thus dealt with by the Common Agricultural Policy
- Agriculture is regarded as a sector that contributes little to the national economy or employment, and isn't seen as important in regional strategies
- The farming and environmental lobbies may be focusing their attention either at farm or at national government levels and not recognising the opportunities that regional strategies present

But there are also opportunities:

- Regional strategies could set the framework for a more bespoke approach to land management and governance within regional and local devolution
- A regional approach offers opportunities where top-down policy (eg on agriculture, biodiversity, renewable energy) meets bottom-up priorities coming out of community participation and local environmental management
- The growth of tourism has underlined that a quality environment, much of which is land-dependent, has an economic value
- Rural land will be a critical resource for the development of renewable energy and for mitigating climate change
- Rural land provides much of the space which regional land use systems need to adapt to the effects of climate change – for example, flood sacrifice areas or changing cropping zones or the relocation or redesign of infrastructure

- Environmental products and services - the so called green jobs – could contribute to economic recovery. Land will be a key asset in this process
- There are signs that a more enlightened understanding may be on its way, of the role land can play within regions. In England several RDAs are now looking at land use futures, or have commissioned land use studies as part of their initial preparation for regional strategies
- In Wales land-based carbon management is part of the action plan to deliver the Assembly Government's Sustainable Development Strategy, whilst in Northern Ireland there is growing interest in the contribution of agriculture to meeting renewable energy targets. Scotland is undertaking its own rural land use study in recognition of its importance to Scotland's future
- In order for rural land to fulfil its potential in this green revolution, we need greater innovation in land use and its governance, better integration between economic and environmental agencies plus stronger links to science and technology. We also need further changes to the delivery of European policy, including developing the regional dimension of the CAP
- Regional strategies cannot do everything, but provide an opportunity to highlight the role of rural land as an asset for both rural and urban communities

What can research bring to regional policymaking?

The production of regional strategies is ushering in an era of significant change in both devolution and governance. Local authorities are seen as key agents of economic progress and the new legislation will give them a duty to produce local economic assessments and greater freedoms to act.

But both they and national government will need to adopt a more creative approach to planning for land use. Public funding and delivery organisations and structures need to work more closely with local authorities if the potential of rural land is to be realised. Relu is doing relevant research, for example:

- Engaging communities in projects looking at flood risk or water catchment management has enhanced the contribution of expert knowledge and produced longer-lasting solutions
- Research into flooding has underlined the fact that new kinds of land use governance are critical to the delivery of flood plain management at a landscape scale, with land managers collaborating rather than acting in isolation
- Developments in the Netherlands have shown that farmers and others working together in new co-operative structures can deliver greater levels of environmental benefit and research shows how this could be applied in the UK
- The uplands act as carbon sinks and scientists are working with partner organisations to develop new carbon trading schemes at local level for sustainable land management
- Researchers are investigating how decisions about appropriate areas for growing energy crops that could contribute to the UK's commitment to reduce carbon emissions, can be balanced against impacts on the landscape, social acceptance, biodiversity and rural economy
- Projects are encouraging local communities to take collaborative ownership of environmental challenges and solutions
- Researchers are investigating new approaches to waste management, such as anaerobic digestion on farms, and the contribution that such new technologies could make to diversification of agricultural practice and to rural development
- Researchers are demonstrating how investing in training for land managers can sustain and develop skills that deliver a wider range of services from rural land
- Research is encouraging collaboration between water companies and land managers to help sustain clean water supplies

Further information

This policy and practice note has been produced as part of a Relu Visiting Fellowship by Frances Rowe, Rural Policy and Partnerships Manager, One North East - the Regional Development Agency for North East England.

Useful resources:

Relu land use research: <http://www.relu.ac.uk/research/How%20we%20use%20our%20land.html>

CLG, (2009) Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill: Policy Document on Regional Strategies <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/citiesandregions/ldedcregionalstrategies>

Defra, (2009) Resilience and opportunity: The Government's Response to the report of the Rural Advocate <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/pdfs/voice/rural-advocate-response.pdf>

CLG, (2009) The Government Response to the Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planning>

Defra (2007) Securing a healthy natural environment: An action plan for embedding an ecosystems approach <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/pdf/natural-environ/eco-action-exec.pdf>

North West RDA (2008) Re-engaging with the Land - Our Most Precious Asset http://www.nwriu.co.uk/researchprogramme/documents/Final_Report_-_Re-engaging_with_the_land.PDF

Welsh Assembly Government (2008) One Wales: One Planet, Consultation on a new Sustainable Development Scheme for Wales <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/desh/consultation/081119oneplaneten.pdf>

Woods, A, (2009) Securing Integrated Land Management: Issues for policy, research and rural communities from the Relu Programme <http://www.relu.ac.uk/research/Land%20Use%20Consultation/Securing%20Integrated%20Land%20Man.pdf>

Swales, V, (2009) The Lie of the Land, Future Challenges for Rural Land Use Policy in Scotland and Possible Responses <http://www.relu.ac.uk/research/Land%20Use%20Consultation/The%20Lie%20of%20the%20Land.pdf>

