

# United Utilities at Haweswater

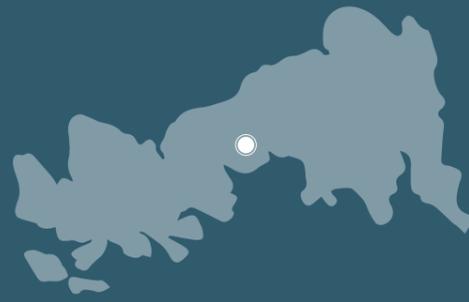
How publicly-funded anti-pollution projects are  
creating expensive environmental disasters

AB O'Rourke | March 2024



# Map

Haweswater in the Lake District. The lake is a few miles south of Penrith, Cumbria. Land owned by United Utilities is within the yellow boundary. Tree guards mentioned in the 'Schemes' chapter can be found across the region, notably around Tongue Rigg.



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# About

## Utilities Uncovered Consultative Panel



The Utilities Uncovered Consultative Panel is a group of individuals who are passionate about protecting England's rivers and water systems. We have come together as landowners who lease or manage land owned by United Utilities (UU) and have become exhausted by their sudden and fundamental policy changes. Changes which are made without any consultation or engagement and which fundamentally alter how people live their lives on moorland. Formed in August 2023 as a direct result of such policy changes, the Panel meets to discuss and review topical issues and highlight the views and recommendations of those living, working, and using the land owned by United Utilities.

Our goal is to address concerns raised by individuals on the Panel and influence decisions by

UU that potentially threaten local communities, all while protecting key water sources from pollution and environmental degradation.

Panel members include individuals from the Peak District, Calderdale and the Forest of Bowland involved in:

- Farming
- Gamekeeping
- Common grazing
- Fishing
- Hospitality

For more information please see:  
[www.uuconsultativepanel.co.uk](http://www.uuconsultativepanel.co.uk)

## The Author

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produced documentaries in Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines, and edited sound for films from several of China's most famous directors. After returning to the UK in 2019 he spent two years as news editor of Fieldsports Channel, producing investigative reports on rural affairs, gun licensing, conservation and politics. He lives the north of England.

# Background

This analysis was carried out after concerns tenant farmers in the Lake District were being coerced by United Utilities into joining expensive conservation experiments at the expense of their own livelihoods. United Utilities is the primary supplier of water and sanitation services for North West England, although its reach stretches as far south as Derbyshire. An invitation for the company to participate was declined.

Red flags about the area were raised a decade ago, prompting the *Better Outcomes on Upland Commons* report, endorsed by King Charles III in his previous role as the Prince of Wales.

As with that publication, farmers, gamekeepers and people working in related organisations were interviewed. Those discussions exposed a gross misuse of public funds that benefit private companies through government-sanctioned schemes. Sometimes lasting 10 years, these schemes are poorly planned and managed and appear to achieve little.

The main justification for the schemes is UU's unproven claim that sheep are to blame for poor quality water from Haweswater. The schemes demand farmers dramatically cut livestock numbers, eventually to levels where their business is not profitable. People who leave schemes say they are threatened with losing their farms. Whether they continue with the schemes or not, the result seems the same.

The actions of Lowther Estates – the other big landowner in the area – are almost identical to UU,

pushing farms into schemes that reduce sheep numbers and increase tree planting. Once farms are vacant, both companies are taking advantage of questionable policies designed by the government to stop climate change. There is no evidence they will have any effect.

The landowners appear to be recruiting the RSPB to try to add the credibility needed to classify schemes as conservation, allowing them to apply for these lucrative green subsidies, which are created by Natural England. It appears United Utilities, Lowther Estates, and the RSPB are working in conjunction to reap financial benefits from the schemes they implement.

The landowners need to do very little other than convince the farmers to rewild and plant trees on their healthy farmland. Once the tenancies run out, the farms are not relet and landowners reap the benefits of the green payments by doing nothing. In private meetings, the landowners admit the land will never be farmed again.

The following people were interviewed for this document:

- 'John', a farmer from the Bampton area by Haweswater
- 'Bill', a farmer from the Bampton area by Haweswater
- Peter Noble, farmer on private land in Bampton
- Adam Day, managing director of the Farmer Network
- Tony Williams, a former Lowther Estates gamekeeper
- Brian Redhead, a retired Lowther Estates head gamekeeper
- Viv Lewis, secretary of the Federation of Cumbria Commoners

# Executive Summary

Coming 10 years after Better Outcomes on Upland Commons, key findings from reports are included to add context to the conclusions of this document.

Released in June 2014, the stated aim of Better Outcomes was to "improve working relations between organisations to strengthen our ability to safeguard and manage the uplands".

In his introduction, the King writes: "I become increasingly distressed when I see opportunities to improve the condition of upland habitats, their communities, businesses and stunning landscapes frustrated due to disagreements."

The report came to virtually identical conclusions as this one, singling out the lack of communication between the landowners and the farming communities as the biggest threat to successful coexistence.

It includes a list of "attributes that characterise the successful delivery of multiple outcomes", none of which appears to have improved since the report was written, specifically communications, clarity of vision or the rights of commoners and use of the wealth of local knowledge from either gamekeepers or farmers.

"Respectful and long enduring relationships between individuals and groups are at the heart of delivering better outcomes on upland commons." That sentence, written in the report in bold for emphasis, sums up the opposite of what has happened in the decade since the research was done, at least in the Haweswater area.

Better Outcomes champions farmers for their vital role in managing the landscape for generations and accepts they now largely have to put up with interventions from the RSPB, which they see as a threat to their livelihoods. This has not changed,

only worsened, with mistrust of the charity leading to a near complete breakdown in cooperation.

Under the heading 'A Vision of Success', numerous recommendations and predictions are made that the writers believe would improve the uplands around Haweswater. Almost none has happened. Problems that existed at the time, such as a lack of engagement on the part of UU and Lowther and late payments from Natural England, still exist. As does concern about RSPB meddling in the livelihoods of farmers. If anything, the situation has worsened, with subsections concerning Farm Succession and New Entrants now moot due to the reluctance of UU and Lowther to renew tenancies.

While the report is accurate in shining a spotlight on contentious issues, there's an underlying feeling that farmers must adapt to modern methods: "Opposition to change, by individuals and organisations, is raising barriers to progress. Ways to move forward need to be found"

The onus appears to be on the farmers rather than the outsiders.

This newer report has found that blindly accepting unproven 'progress' promoted by UU, RSPB, Natural England and Lowther offers few positives for communities and the countryside. Often, the 'old ways' of doing things have more benefits.

Following revelations about United Utilities pumping large amounts of sewage into watercourses, it has been ranked one of the worst water-polluting companies in the UK. Given this, it could be regarded as an expert in pollution.

However, it fails to back up its claim that farmers are polluting Haweswater and by extension, the water supply to the northwest of England, with sheep urine. The company's labs found nothing wrong with samples from the lake.

Nevertheless the company, with the help of the RSPB and government grants, is pushing farmers into schemes where they must cut sheep numbers to reduce the adverse effect they're supposedly having. These schemes demand rapid radical changes without small-scale trials beforehand, the kind a



normal business owner would do when testing new technology, for example. Farming has always been about gradual change because it takes a long time and farmers are dealing with their livelihoods, so will not risk them in large-scale experiments.

The cuts in livestock demanded by the programmes, together with tree planting and neglect redefined as rewilding, raise the risk of wildfires and lower the value of the land, as fields are turned into woodland or wastelands filled with common predators. The damage caused would take a generation to repair and the system is a threat to the UK food supply.

While the farmers' businesses are at stake, UU, RSPB and Natural England are gambling with millions of pounds of public money and nobody seems to be held responsible when the schemes fail. In at least one case, UU has created an environmental disaster it has seemingly washed its hands of.

The pollution problems UU is facing stem from the company's outdated facilities, which are incapable of handling the volume of sewage produced in contemporary Britain. As the population grows steadily each year, the company should acknowledge it needs to spend money overhauling its archaic

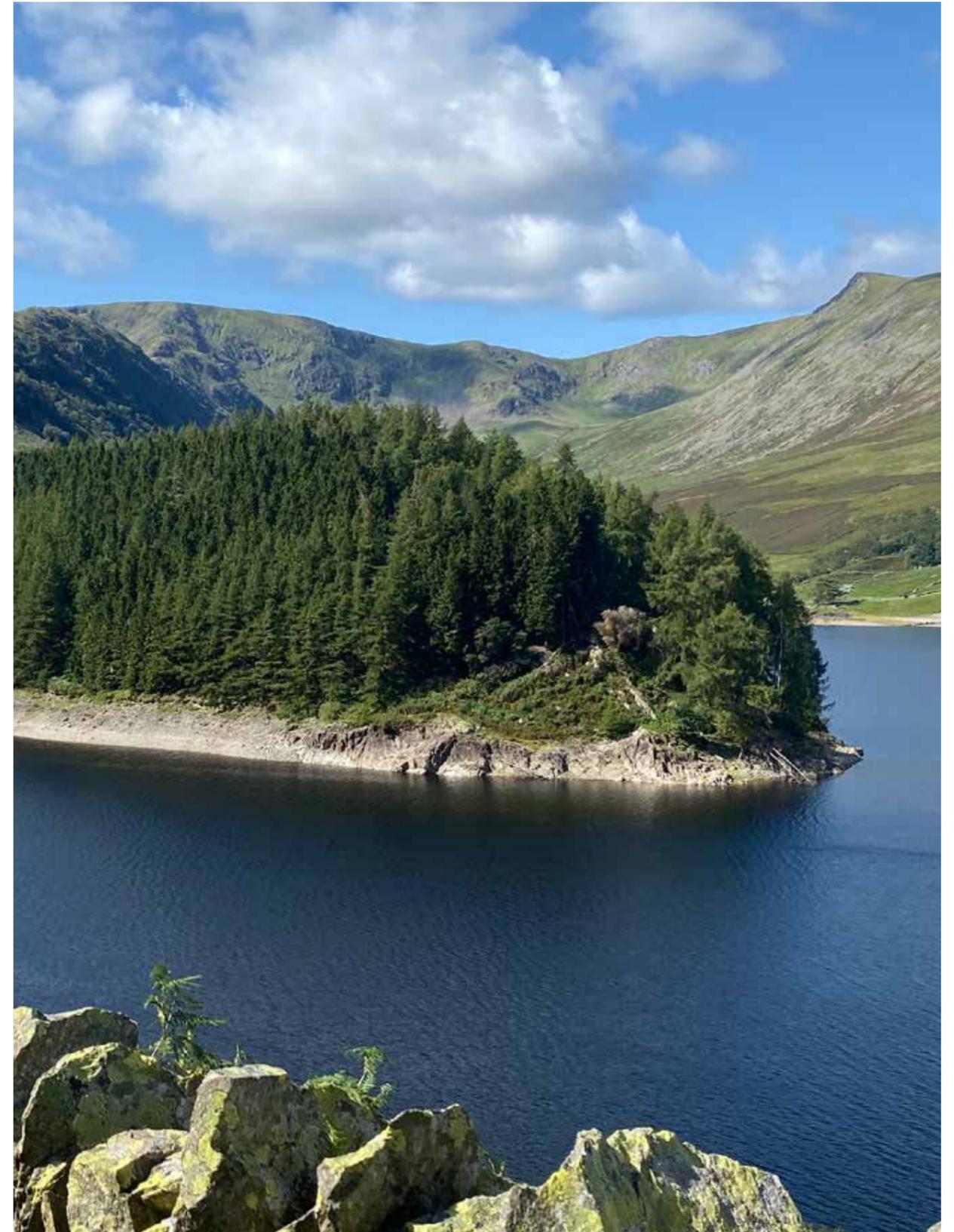
infrastructure to meet modern needs and those of the future instead of passing the buck and blaming farmers.

The RSPB at Haweswater has been awarded a lease reportedly 40-years long by United Utilities. By contrast most sheep farmers leases are around five years. This prevents long-term planning, creates instability and eliminates family security. Farmers should be able to access lease agreements which more reflect those available to the RSPB.

It is hard to believe the cost to the public purse from this project represents value for money. A better use of funds is likely to come from increased investment in the technology for treating the water.

Charles III sums up the Better Outcomes report this way: "The question, of course, arises: what next? I can only pray that all the conversations which have been held in the process of producing this report will lead to generally better, longer term outcomes on our precious upland commons."

Our updated research has found that around Haweswater at least, the outlook is even further from the King's uplifting vision.



# Recent history of the Haweswater area

Manchester Corporation bought the land around Haweswater above its pipeline through compulsory purchase in the 1960s, so it could collect the water running into the lake. According to Bill, one of the farmers in the scheme, the agreement included promises by the company to “look after the cultural heritage and the farming”. It also “couldn’t just buy it and say, right, everybody off”, as it had a responsibility to the local community. “They weren’t supposed to sell off the properties either.”

Since Manchester Corporation changed its name in 1995, “they’ve pulled quite a few fast ones”, according to Bill. While the newly-named United Utilities covered the catchment area and water issues, another company handled the buildings and houses on UU’s land. This separate arm could sell properties without breaching the original agreement with the tenants and farmers.

UU’s stated aim was to amalgamate farms to make them more viable. Some farmers benefitted, as they were given small pieces of land from farms that were divided. If farms lost land during the revision of property borders, the company built them structures such as cattle shelters as compensation. At least one farm was split up completely, with the land distributed to nearby farms and the farmhouse sold as residential property.

Now though, the plan seems to have changed, with UU aggressively retaking land to plant trees. “I’ve probably got a few more years [left farming] but after my day, they won’t relet the farm as it is now,” says Bill. “Without a shadow of doubt they will... insist on fewer numbers of sheep at the fell and things like that because they already suggested that’s what they’re going to be doing.”



The RSPB has always been interested in the Haweswater estate because of the wildlife, Bill says. In 2013, UU paid the tenant at Naddle Farm to get out. “They didn’t chuck him out,” he recalls, “but they offered him a fairly-good carrot so that the RSPB could get in. It was quite controversial and people weren’t very happy about it.”

At the time, the charity promised to carry on farming but in a ‘sustainable’ way, then show others how they could farm and work with nature at the same time. A board of farmers would be created to advise locals on environmental issues. “It never happened,” says Bill. “Farming was drastically reduced virtually straight away... This board of farmers never came to anything and you could see in a relatively short time that it was going to be a nature reserve.”

The reserve was put under the control of RSPB’s Lee Schofield, who is “very intelligent, very careful with his words... but definitely not on the side of farming”.

Not long after, the same happened to neighbouring Swindale Farm. “They paid the tenant farmer there a decent lump of money to get out and the RSPB took that over,” Bill recalls. Naddle had an estimated 3,000 sheep and Swindale up to 1,500. Those numbers have been slashed to a combined total of less than 500. “Now they’re not even trying to hide the fact that it’s a nature reserve. That’s kind of what started it all. I did hear that Lee Schofield was looking to put in for one of the farms that’s coming up in the valley.”

Farmer Network managing director Adam Day says: “UU has in some cases offered farm business tenancies to farmers as short as one year. Yet the RSPB were awarded a 40-year farm business tenancy on UU’s Swindale Farm in the Bampton Valley. This may well be an indicator of things to come as there are other examples locally of landed estates taking farms back in hand and out of the tenanted [farming] sector altogether.”

“It was quite controversial and people weren’t very happy about it.” BILL, FARMER

## Summary

- Manchester Corporation signed agreement to preserve farming and culture in land deal
- Name change to United Utilities (UU) led to breaches in agreement
- UU starts selling properties and shunning farmers
- RSPB takes over two UU farms, cuts sheep numbers by 80%
- RSPB breaks promise to farm ‘sustainably’ or advise farmers and turns the farms into a reserve
- UU offering tenancies as low as one year

# Modern farming

By all accounts, it's very difficult for people to become farmers. Besides modernisation reducing the job market, first-time farmers face landowners offering them short tenancies, if they're even offering anything. "You put in for a tenancy like you would anywhere else if a farm came up," says Bill, "but Lowther farms aren't coming on the market to let. The last couple of UU ones haven't come up for relet."

Farmer Network's Adam Day is concerned about farm tenures since the introduction of farm business tenancies in the 1990s. "[This] took away any right of generational succession and with it much-needed security," he says. "Farm business tenancies are generally way shorter than the 20 or 25 years needed by tenants to create a viable business, bring up a family, invest in the farm infrastructure, be part of the local community and its circular economy."

In 2023, the Rock Review (a government-sponsored review of the tenanted farming sector) found the average length of farm business tenancies in 2001 was slightly more than three years. "Such a short term of tenure gives tenants absolutely no chance to invest in the business or indeed the local natural environment," says Day. "It literally is just farming from day to day... That very much puts all of the control back into the hands of the landlord and offers no secure future, particularly for young people trying to get a start in the industry."

The decade or two it normally takes to establish a farm is impossible when people are only being offered five-year tenancies and at the end, there's no guarantee they will be renewed. The best farm business tenancies available now are said to be 10 to 15-years. Even then, pressure to join schemes that reduce a farm's profitability and value is great.

"There's no accountability, there's nobody held up to answer for those schemes not working." JOHN, FARMER

"They want all the sheep off the fell," says John, a farmer from the Bampton area. "They want the farmers out of their hair and I've no doubt when I come out of here... it'll just all get let to the RSPB, planted [with trees] and rewilded."

Financial support from programmes like the Countryside Stewardship Scheme often demand reducing sheep numbers. For some farmers this may be acceptable depending on their own circumstances. "Others like John are proud and passionate to be commercial hill shepherds," says Day. "It is their culture, their history and heritage. Seeing long-established hefted flocks massively reduced or in some cases totally removed from the hills altogether never to return, is painful and can have a huge effect on the wellbeing of farming families. So, there is growing pressure coming from many of the landed estates and this is filtering into local farmers' daily lives."

John says all schemes have done is devalue his farm and shrink profits at a time when feed, fuel and electricity costs are going through the roof. He can't see any future in his farm, especially after Natural England's payments to compensate cuts in livestock slowed to a halt. "You can't go and get your shopping on a Friday night at Sainsbury's and say, I'll pay you in 18 months," John complains. "You've had to cut your stock numbers to get into the scheme. So you've got no stock to sell when your rent's due and you've got bills to pay. Or you've got a £4,000 or £5,000 repair bill for a tractor or a machine that's broken down."

He told UU land agent Caroline Holden that his business has suffered more with each scheme: "I'm going to increase my assets and increase my stock numbers. And that's totally counterproductive to what they're wanting."

John believes UU is using Natural England to create the schemes, as a way to get farmers off the fell. "We've had two schemes, 20 years, neither have worked," Bill says. "There's no accountability, there's nobody held up to answer for those schemes not working [despite] the amount of money that's been spent on them. Somebody should be asking questions somewhere... Why would we, as farmers, want to sign up to another scheme that's unlikely to work? I'm 53 now. I need somewhere to retire to. I've got no stock."

Lowther Estates refers to farmers like John who reject the schemes as "blockers". At its meetings, it's made clear there is no future for farming on its land, unless it is doing the farming.

Day feels there's a growing lack of trust between some tenants and their landlords: "Tenant farmers on some estates have said to me they would like more face-to-face communication with both their landlords and Natural England, who are heavily involved in the commons schemes but there continues to be a growing trust issue on the farmers part and a lack of engagement from the other side."

Favouritism – perceived or actual – in the distribution of funds from Natural England is seen as a divide and conquer strategy. The fact outside money has been introduced into the system is the problem, according to John: "It was badly shared out and some farmers getting a lot of money for doing next to nothing. Then there's a handful of us only getting a little bit and doing all the work... Before there was ever any money, any of these schemes from National England... the whole community, all the commoners worked together. You went and gathered together, you did the job right. Now it's just putting one farmer against another."

The pressure on farmers to sign up to Lowther and UU's latest scheme is increasing, but so are the 'blockers'. The incentive is money but there's growing opposition to the idea of more debilitating livestock cuts – not only in the short term according to Bill.

"Sheep go with the farm, so... if you take that farm, you have to take on that stock of fell sheep and you have to buy them and pay what they call heathage and acclimatisation on those sheep," Bill says. "Then when you sell those sheep to the next tenant, you get that payment as well, which all falls apart when you take a farm with 1,000 sheep and when you come to let it go, the sheep numbers have reduced to 250."

That's not the only long-term effect. While UU and Lowther argue it means fewer scheme members will have to lose sheep, there will also be fewer farmers helping in the traditional gathering of sheep (hefting) from the common. Few of the commoners appear willing to help the RSPB gather its sheep.

Schemes are sold as the only way forward. Resistance is met with blackmail, bullying, coercion, threats and possibly extortion. At least, that's how people feel when under pressure from UU to join the RSPB-led

experiments. Successful farmers have been denied new contracts, while others told their rent will triple if they don't sign up.

A worker in the industry says: "If they don't take part, they will suffer as a result. There's blackmail going on." They say farmers have been told that if they don't sign up to schemes, "it'll affect [their] future". He says the disgruntled farmers are ready to speak out if they're "backed into a corner like rats".

"All these little farms are disappearing," says John. "I know this will never be a farm again when I leave [because] UU have absolutely no interest in farming or the local community. They say the right things in the right meetings, but what they do in practice is a totally different thing."



“All these little farms are disappearing. I know this will never be a farm again when I leave.”

JOHN, FARMER

John was in two schemes, each lasting 10 years. At the end of the first, Natural England said it hadn't achieved what it wanted. John's stock numbers had been cut 50% and he felt he "got pushed" into the second, an HLS (High Level Stewardship) which meant more stock cuts and restrictions. He was told it achieved the same result – nothing.

A third scheme is out of the question, he says: "The figures just do not stack up and I've explained that to [land agent Caroline Holden]... This has been going on for three years. She's never come back with any solutions, any answers or anything."

Now the land agent has threatened to take acres of land away from him, land he says sustains valuable crops. "I've had it for 23, 24 years," he says. "And she's trying to treble the rent on the stead."

John says his health has been affected. He's fit after working outdoors every day for more than two decades. His doctor has prescribed several medicines but nothing will keep his blood pressure down. "There's no negotiation. There's no reasoning with them. It's their way or you get this sort of intimidation."

According to Bill, several UU tenants have signed up to the third scheme because their landlord effectively told them to. "They don't know what they're signing up on, really."

Another farmer, who does not want to be named, says one of the reasons the schemes fail is because there's nobody monitoring them. Natural England doesn't have the manpower, they complain. With nobody monitoring, the schemes can't be adjusted if they appear not to be working or have unforeseen side effects. Then, after 10 years, the farmers are left feeling it's their fault.

"Most of them (schemes) didn't have an objective when they set off," says Bill. "So there wasn't anything that you could really be judged by, although Natural England did say after the fact that there were things that they were supposed to be achieving, but they were never put in the original deals."

During the last scheme, Bill toured the common with Natural England's Harry Kay, who was in charge of the 'farm environment plan'. Kay pointed out that heather was bigger than usual and bilberry bushes actually had berries because there were fewer sheep eating them. That was the only achievement Bill noticed.

"I spoke to Caroline Holden one time about the common and she said, well, we want to return it to nature and plant a lot more trees on it and this sort of thing," he says. "I think at the end of the day, if they had it without any sheep on and all covered in trees, they would be happy."

One of the problems, the farmers say, is commoning only works well when there are enough sheep and the farmers are working together. In the Bampton Valley, for example, farms slot together like pieces of a jigsaw. What UU and Lowther are doing by not renewing leases is removing pieces in the middle of the jigsaw, making hefting more difficult and less profitable. If this continues, traditional sheep gathering will end as it won't be worthwhile for the commoners. It has been described as "slow attrition".

Peter Noble, a farmer on his own land in Bampton, says this of UU and RSPB: "When we did the maps with the powers that be [in the last scheme] we said, don't plant here or there because that's where we gather the sheep. Lo and behold, everywhere we said don't plant suddenly became planted... If you're trying to wind the local population up, you're going the right way about it. We can all work together if people would be sensible about things and it would work absolutely great. But the impression we get is there's an agenda, which is one thing, [and secondly] it's just another box-ticking exercise. They've got to get the commoners on board to get the scheme to go ahead."



# Schemes

## 1. Environmentally-sensitive area scheme (tree-planting to stop soil erosion). Result: failure

Recurring characteristics of schemes at Haweswater appear to be poor planning, disregard for locals and financial mismanagement. Despite being sold as 'conservation', this experiment was and still is, an environmental catastrophe. The architects tried to pass off its failure as "trial and error".

At Poorhag Gill on Wetsleddale Moor, you get a sense of the scale of the disaster. The gill runs into United Utilities' Wet Sleddale reservoir. Along its banks, hundreds of trees were planted in 2013 as part of a multimillion-pound project designed by the RSPB's David Shackleton to limit erosion. Only about 1% of the trees remain.

Conversely, around 99% of the estimated 100,000 plastic and metal tree guards are still there, littering the northern Lake District, as well as wooden stakes they were tied to with perhaps hundreds of thousands of plastic cable ties. After complaints, the water company promised to clear up the mess, but it's unclear what it has done, if anything.

Even the few trees that survived are still trapped in their wire guards. This suggests there was never an intention to take the guards away. A recovery/clean-up

was supposed to have been in the original brief and budget. It's unknown what the money allocated to the tree guard recovery was spent on. An operation to 'free' the trees after the scheme's resounding success and remove the guards, stakes and cable ties from the moor would be just as easy/difficult as one to recover the debris after its dismal failure. If money wasn't allocated for either operation, that would be recklessness on the part of the United Utilities, RSPB and Natural England executives who approved the plan and multimillion-pound budget, which is believed to have been funded by Ofwat with taxpayer money.

Besides the environmental damage, locals were particularly unhappy their warnings were ignored. Bampton farmer Peter Noble summed up how they felt: "We've been in meeting after meeting with RSPB, UU, Natural England... We've explained to them we live here and have done for generations. We do actually know what goes on and we've seen it all before... Then they go out and do what they were going to do anyway."

There were also concerns about the impact the scheme had on upland management for ground nesting birds, including grouse. Grouse shooting – when numbers allow – is an integral part of the economy and community in some upland areas, but the planting for the scheme seemed to totally ignore traditional use of grouse shooting butts.



“What allowed Natural England to do all this on this ground when it's a SSSI?”

TONY WILLIAMS,  
GAMEKEEPER

### Summary

- Lowther and United Utilities rarely renew farm leases
- UU pressuring farmers to join schemes that cut livestock numbers
- No apparent accountability at UU or RSPB for failed schemes
- Few are willing to cooperate with RSPB farmers
- Farmers losing "heathage and acclimatisation" payments by cutting sheep numbers
- UU accused of coercion and extortion
- Schemes are not being monitored

“You do not trial and error at the cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money.”

PETER NOBLE,  
FARMER



Being a managed moor, birdlife was varied and thriving through predator control. Birds such as curlew and lapwing had previously successfully nested and resided at Haweswater.

Gamekeeper Tony Williams was among the people hired to plant the trees and straight away had reservations: “When you put trees in places like this (Wetsleddale Moor), you create a predator shadow... This valley, because it has a lot of trees in it, that’s where your crows nest. They don’t nest right out on the open fell because there’s no nest sites. But once you plant those trees right out onto the fell top... that produces a nest site for your crow or your pair of crows. So they hunt further out onto that ground. So any wader or ground-nesting birds that you’ve got there, it’s an even bigger threat.”

The extra trees would have provided shelter for foxes, making them more difficult to control. Since that didn’t happen, it could be seen as a bonus for ground-nesting birds on the SSSI moor – if there were any. Since RSPB manages the moor, heather burning is banned, making it unattractive for curlews, which prefer safe, stably ground.

On our tour of the moor, Williams found several tree guards that were still intact, with the ‘biodegradable’ plastic squares unaffected by 10 years on a moor being battered by torrential rain and strong winds. Two complete guards were taken for testing. “What allowed Natural England to do all this on this ground when it’s a SSSI? All this litter and pollution,” Williams says. “It seems to be one rule for one and one rule for another.”

A lot of the trees were planted in places they were unlikely to grow, including shallow soil on rock outcrops. Williams questioned the logic behind that when talking to UU’s biodiversity officer (now catchment partnership officer) John Gorst: “What he said was, well if we find there’s any trees in the wrong place, we can always move them. I says yeah, but if you’ve paid for the tree, the guard and the man to plant it, would it not make more sense to plant the tree in the right place in the first place?”

Beyond the moor to the west is Tongue Rigg, a hill Williams says is surrounded by debris after the tree guards were all blown off the top and slopes. The planting went miles further on, despite what the farmers were originally told, according to Noble: “We agreed to plant out one area, which was roughly about 100 hectares and it was deer fenced and the planting

inside that area has been very successful. Outside the line, the idea was that they would sporadically plant juniper in cages to help hold the ground together until the ground could regenerate enough to hold itself. We said at the time, that’s a complete and utter waste of time because... as soon as the juniper turns green, the deer will just put his head into the cage, eat all the juniper.”

“The guard was about 6’ by 4,” says Williams. “The idea was that it was bent round into a tube about 6’ high to stop the deer... They couldn’t, so they had to bend them the other way. So they’re 4’ high and this far across and when I first saw ‘em, I thought a deer could stand inside that guard to eat the trees.”

With a foot or two of snow on the ground, deer get easier access to trees in the correctly-assembled guards. “That’s the time of year when they can’t get to the vegetation because it’s covered in snow and that’s when they hammer your trees,” says Williams. “I think... they want very few deer up here. It seems to be countryside now that a lot of these people that don’t want you shooting a fox, they’re happy to see a lot of deer shot.”

One of the main problems, Williams says, is most of the trees were planted by contractors trying to work as fast as they could since they were paid per tree. The more trees they plant, the worse the work, with stakes not driven far enough into the ground and guards poorly assembled. “As a gamekeeper I’ve seen hundreds of woods planted and you see when it’s not been done right, all the tree guards end up blowing over. They all end up at the wall back, end up in the streams. That’s exactly what’s happened here. But nobody’s come to clean it up.”

Noble says the farmers were assured at meetings the debris would be collected: “At the time the agreement was that anything that was not successful, the posts and cages would be collected and nobody would notice any difference. Well, that’s not happened. So, we’ve got rusting cages everywhere, posts broken off everywhere and no juniper whatsoever because the deer have eaten it all.”

At a meeting in 2019, Williams confronted UU representatives John Gorst and Caroline Holden, who blamed red deer for eating all the trees. He said sloppy contractors were also at fault and pointed out what he felt was a bigger issue – microplastic pollution in UU’s drinking water. Small plastic ‘windows’ in the tree

guards allow light in to keep the tree warm but are designed to drop out and dissolve once the tree is big enough. The guard’s skeleton remains, protecting the tree from gusts until its roots are strong. “Now those little bits of plastic have all broken down, they’re getting into that watercourse, running down that stream, running into your reservoir,” Williams told them. “Caroline Holden, she’s going, oh yes, yes, yes, yes, I’ve taken that on board. Tried to shut me up.”

Still, nothing was done, as far as Williams can tell. He got in touch with local Liberal Democrats MP Tim Farron, who emailed UU managing director Louise Beardmore. “She said that they were clearing up and I thought, she won’t have ever seen them,” Williams says. “She won’t have been up here. Not only that, most of them you can’t clear up because they’re that grown into the grass nobody will ever find them.”

We contacted Tim Farron and got a reply from his media liaison. They told us Farron would only respond to queries from constituents. We argued the Lake District is a national treasure and worldwide tourist attraction, so the scope of interest should be the whole of the UK. Only then were we asked to submit questions, but they were not answered.

Noble says every taxpayer should be concerned about the amount of money wasted by UU, Natural England and RSPB on an experiment that had no positive outcomes. “When I spoke to the lady at Natural England... I said I pay tax, so I don’t want to see the money wasted. Her answer was, a lot of it’s trial and error. I’m like, you shouldn’t trial and error it over hundreds of acres. You should trial and error over two acres and see if it works. If it works, move it onto a bigger scale and if it doesn’t work, then you move on to plan B. You do not trial and error at the cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers’ money for a complete and utter failure.”

Williams was told the scheme cost £3 million - that included flying the tree guards and stakes out to remote areas by helicopter: “For the start they had one helicopter but that wasn’t able to cope because there was that much stuff,” he says. “So they ended up with two helicopters... and they were here for at least five days each. So that’s 10 helicopter days and UU staff told me those helicopters were £37 a minute. And Ofwat paid for this.”

When asked what the aim of the project was, UU told Williams it was to improve water quality by stopping



peat erode, as it was costing “a fortune” to remove peat particles at Watchgate treatment plant near Kendal. “I said to ‘em, if you’ve got a water supply that runs off peat, if you have heavy rain, you’ll have brown water. This ain’t going to stop it. And he said, we know but we’ve got to be seen to try something. I’m presuming Ofwat is public money. So they’ve thrown £3 million away... because this project has benefited nothing.” Williams had previously been told Wet Sleddale reservoir was not drinking water. It was known as “compensation reservoir” because it topped up the river during periods of low rain so the fish wouldn’t die.

As Noble points out, the taxpayer-funded project was effectively to compensate for UU’s failure to upgrade its water treatment facilities: “So if the farmer agrees, that gets the scheme through [and] gets a lot of funding for the ideas UU want to implement up there anyway, which kind of rubs me the wrong way a little bit because if I need to do anything [on my farm], I have to pay for it. Whereas they seem to want to get everything done to improve their own business and their own water quality and own everything else, but out of the taxpayer’s purse.”

## Summary

- UU and RSPB ignored warnings from gamekeepers and others that the scheme would fail
- Trees planted on unsuitable ground and around grouse butts
- No apparent plan to remove the tree guards whether scheme was success or failure
- Wetsleddale Moor is a SSSI, raising questions about how Natural England justifies the mess
- Tourists from all over the world visit the area, so the problem is of national interest
- Two helicopters needed to move tree guards/posts at great expense
- Farmers question why public money is being used to help private companies

## 2. Sustainable catchment management project (tree-planting to stop sheep urine). Result: unclear

This project tried to create fenced-off 'wildlife corridors' that allowed sheep to move freely away from watercourses. The aim was to reduce overgrazing and sheep urine entering streams. Sheep numbers were also cut.

In return for areas lost, compensation came in the form of UU building structures to help farmers. "You'd get your yard covered if you had cattle feeding outside in winter or something like that. Some did better out of it than others," says Bill.

It involved planting more trees and shrubs. However, when leaves died and branches fell off, they clogged up the watercourses, according to Bill. The blockages caused flooding and fencing off the new trees made them more difficult to manage.

As Bill notes, for another scheme aimed at improving water quality, the opposite happened again: "I think they could well be worried more about water quality after a while... We had one place I had to dig a bit of a drain out and it was just rotten stinking horrible stuff that I was digging out of it and I had to do it because it [drained] water off the road... But, yeah, it wasn't what you would want to be running into Haweswater, that's for sure."



## 3. Penrith to Kendal arc landscape recovery scheme (tree-planting). Result: still in planning stage

This new "vision" aims to "link up and restore the farmed and wild habitats of a vast arc of land from Penrith to Kendal", according to an information sheet emailed to farmers. The writers claim it will be "transformational" for the land and people who live and work on it – "a game changer for species recovery and habitats".

The document says the Defra-funded project "is also an 'ark' with a 'k' because this is about saving, protecting and enhancing our farming communities [and] unique landscape".

There are no company/organisation logos or names on the document, except in email addresses that point to Ellergreen (UU's hydro-power company), Lowther Estates and RSPB.

They assure readers it:

1. is "not a rewilding scheme"
2. is "about creating a robust, rich, resilient and diverse series of ecosystems"
3. is "led by farmers, land managers and ecologists"
4. "will benefit our local communities and economies"
5. will "support regenerative farming"

There are two stages. The first is a two-year "development" phase, where farmers and land managers discuss what will happen in the 20-year second stage. The writers insist this is "bringing back

decision making to the local level" so the scheme is customised for the area.

Before stage 1 starts, they "need first to demonstrate to DEFRA that there is wide-scale interest". Defra only needs "an expression of interest from farmers and land managers – not a commitment to give up land or to manage in a certain way" and "support from local organisations involved in land management across the Arc might also help".

The second stage is slated for 2026-2046. Bypassing the promised 'local-level decision-making', the planners have already decided that farmers should be attracted by "enhanced revenue payments (area payments) and enhanced capital payments" then encouraged to improve "water retention in soils", "sustainable grassland management for livestock" and restore peatlands and hay meadows. Farmers will also be given advice and "access to financing from the carbon market", "technical, administrative and research support" that will produce "transformational change".

It's unclear why any farmer would need to offset their emissions by buying carbon credits, since all many of them do is plant things that feed on carbon dioxide. At the same time, it's likely a 'nitrate credit' system will

"We would like to see place-based schemes [where] farmers get paid for actions and outcomes they deliver."

VIV LEWIS, FEDERATION OF CUMBRIA COMMONERS

be enforced during the 20 years the scheme runs. This will affect farm overheads. Since the carbon market is riddled with fraud, the nitrate credit system is likely to follow suit.

While the benefits listed in the brief suggest the farmers are in control of the project, the writers make it clear people who do not sign up ('blockers') risk losing their farms: "20 years of support should provide land owners and managers the certainty they have hitherto lacked in order to invest in the future of their farms. It means that farmers and the next generation have a much greater chance of staying on the land."

More pressure is added here: "Time is tight so please don't delay... Unfortunately, it is unlikely that DEFRA will allow land holdings which don't express an interest now to then join at a later date."

Historic attitudes of UU and Lowther towards farming and their tenants, such as reducing the length of tenancies and cutting livestock numbers, appear at odds with the document's claims that it will be "led by farmers" and "benefit our local communities and economies". The scheme is twice as long as others. It's unclear whether participants

can withdraw if they believe it isn't working or if the creators add extra restrictions that make it impractical or unprofitable. If they did, we can confidently assume it would affect the chances of them renewing their leases. The only sign of a U-turn in policy is the suggestion the landowners might give out 20-year farm business tenancies.

"Orton Farm Cluster is already driving forward a bid", the emailed document boasts, adding that a "loose group of farmers, landowners and local organisations [are] trying to tease out the level of interest across the area".

It's unclear why the area is endangered. It's sparsely populated and locals blocked a plan to put up wind turbines. Farmers we spoke to are sceptical, unable to see anything attractive about the scheme. They're concerned UU may be exaggerating support to convince Defra it's worth pumping millions of pounds of public money into.

"There isn't a lot in it for the farmers unless you want to do what Lowther are doing and take all the sheep off,

"I object to it on the principle that the main people pushing it forward are United Utilities and Lowther." BILL, FARMER



put a few cattle on and plant a load of trees to make it woodland pasture," says Bill. "You can do this hedge but you can't do a farm building.. and they want to create more livestock corridors. It may be that there's stuff in there that might enable people to get into other schemes... I can see precious little myself and I object to it on the principle that the main people pushing it forward are UU and Lowther."

While the invitation only requires an expression of interest, Bill says UU land agent Caroline Holden has been trying to get hold of his farm's single business identifier number, despite him telling her he wasn't interested. If these numbers are passed on to Defra or Natural England, they could be taken as proof a party is interested. If enough are presented to Defra in this way, it might be enough to secure millions of pounds in funding, whether anyone was interested or not. "There's been a lot of pressure put on for people to join up," Bill says.

In 2022 the Farmer Network hosted a meeting between local farmers and the RSPB about working together on a funded conservation project close to Penrith. "The farmers were open to the idea but expressed deeply felt concerns about their future as tenants on some of the estates," says Adam Day. "The farmers wanted some group discussion as to the future of their families to enable long-term planning. This has not happened although meetings have been organised related to the conservation project.

The RSPB continues to try to engage the local farming community but with limited success. The lack of trust and the stress of such an uncertain future for the tenanted farm sector across Cumbria is a crying shame. Tenant farmers have been the bedrock of farming in Cumbria for generations."

There's speculation that despite the claims in the emailed invitation, the plan is just a massive rewilding project that will end up destroying farms and not benefitting anybody or even nature.

"I have to be careful to offer a balanced view," says Day. "For some landowning farmers the thought of maxing out on environmental payments including large tree-planting schemes will be a real consideration, but I am more focussed on farmers who proudly and judiciously get out of bed to farm, produce food and look after the local landscapes every working day of their lives. To have this taken away in the name of 'environment', be it biodiversity, trees or water quality, is very sad to see and in some cases disingenuous."

Viv Lewis, secretary of the Federation of Cumbria Commoners, says key flaws in the approach by Natural England are its focus on restrictions, rather than rewards and the flexibility to tailor plans to places. "I know it's complicated to design and deliver, but we would like to see place-based schemes which are developed between Natural England and local farmers and the farmers get paid for actions and outcomes

they deliver," she says. "But these outcomes have to be realistic and achievable. At the moment we get the opposite – for 'mid tier' we get a long list of grant options, code names and numbers, eligibility criteria, where you can and can't use them, prohibited activities and more. It's complicated to work out what's best for your farm business. If you are interested in 'higher tier' options that pay more, Natural England staff tell you what you can and can't do on your land to receive the payments."

After 20 years and two schemes that not only failed, but damaged the environment, it's alarming that UU, Lowther and RSPB feel confident enough to run a new scheme lasting another 20 years. However, they are playing with public money, whereas the farmers have their livelihoods and in some cases, everything they own at stake. It's no wonder they're not interested in gambling it away on a conservation experiment that has no obvious benefits.

## Summary

- Writers suggest signing up for the scheme will help farmers renew their tenancies
- UU suspected of inflating interest to secure government grant
- Farmers concerned they're going to lose their livelihoods
- UU and Lowther refuse to meet the farmers to discuss the project

# Community

When landowners refuse to renew leases on their farms, there's a ripple effect in the rural community that's felt in nearby towns and beyond.

Farmer Network's Adam Day explains: "Consider all of the accountants, solicitors, feed suppliers, vets, auctioneers and others, you'll quickly get to over 40 businesses that work with any farm business to a greater or lesser extent. Farmers are hugely important to the local economy, but few seem to consider this."

"They're just destroying local communities," says John. "Fifteen, 20 years ago, any [farm] that came up, if there's somebody retired or something, they weren't let again, they would sell the house off and two or three

acres of land and then split the remaining land up to neighbouring farms."

The effect of the closures and whether people join schemes is dividing the communities, according to John. "I've got neighbours, I thought they were good friends, But I've learned this last year or two since I won't agree to sign up to another scheme. They'll barely speak to me now. I haven't fallen out with them, but I know exactly what's behind it. What suits one doesn't suit everybody. What suits one business doesn't work for every business."

Aspirations of young people, in this case those living in the Bampton Valley near Haweswater, are taken away

with every farm closure. There are families that would love the chance to farm but they'll never get that chance as the land is unlikely to ever be farmed again.

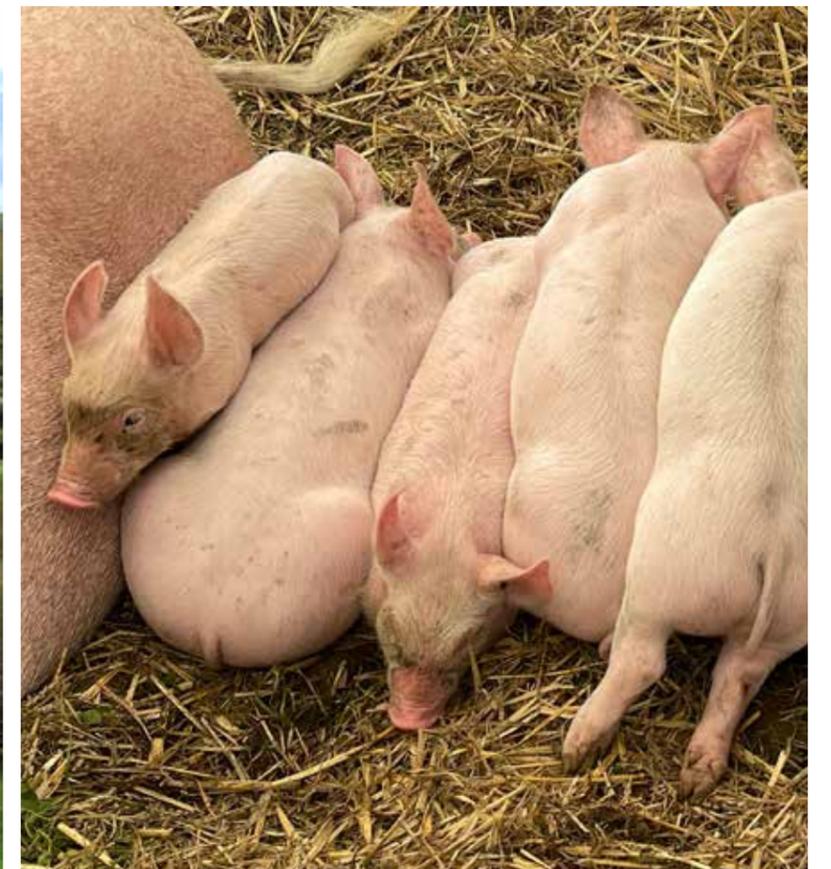
"Both of my children are interested in farming and it's getting less and less farms to get jobs on and all the rest of it," said a Cumbria resident at the Westmoreland Show in September 2023. "There's a lot of farmers coming out of retirement because there's nobody else [to do the work]. Then our main agricultural college Newton Rigg shut down. There's lots of kids my daughter's age that would like to farm. Instead they're going to have to travel down to Myerscough College at Preston... The main thing in our area is farming and they shut down our college. It's terrible."

Aggravating the issue is the increase in rural houses, sometimes farmhouses, being turned into accommodation that can be booked online. "Lakeland timeshare in Langdale is just a classic example really of the sort of implosion of labour," said another person

at the show. "They import people [from Barrow-in-Furness] to Kendal every morning to provide... cleaning services – a coach-load of people every day. A surprising amount of traffic [is] supermarket delivery vans around the valleys... Our back lane in Langdale, it's pot-holed by the delivery vans hurtling around. We've got a good Co-op in the village and there is good food around here, but outsiders, they rent their cottage online. They order from a big supermarket chain and somebody drives 10 miles and delivers the stuff."

## Summary

- Ripple effect of farm closures affects countless businesses
- United Utilities 'divide and conquer' tactics splitting up rural communities
- Shrinking farming prospects for local youth and young families
- Influx of tourists and outsiders reduces farm labour pool



"They're just destroying local communities."

JOHN, FARMER

# Green factors

The policies carried out by United Utilities and Lowther are directed by 'green' subsidies through Defra and Natural England. They are in line with controversial 'net zero' pledges the government has made that critics argue are unrealistic, economically unsound, have no proven benefit to the environment and rely on technology that hasn't been invented. The focus of the companies is making money and since they can make more planting trees than growing crops or managing livestock, that's all they appear to be doing, instead of reletting their land.

Adam Day of the Farmer Network worries that a huge corporate land grab is underway across the country. "There is a belief that there is far more value to landowners in carbon trading, tree planting and bio-diversity net gain credits than the tenanted farm sector can ever provide to a landlord," he says. "Right now, many estates across Cumbria are gearing up for the boom should it arrive. Hence the desire to take land back in hand as the opportunity arises, or at best make it relatively quick and easy to take back land farmed by tenants on short term agreements."

There are several examples where this has already happened and productive, viable farms have been tree-planted with generous funding schemes. The collateral damage includes farm production and those engaged in the farming industry. At the same time, large corporations have been moving into small communities and snapping up businesses. At least one Cumbria housing developer has bought large areas of farmland in the Lake District. The company is capable of paying a lot more than locals can. This is one of the reasons farmers are insecure.

Schemes farmers are 'encouraged' to sign up to focus on tree-planting and rewilding. Planting trees is said to 'offset carbon', which is increasingly regarded as pointless. Secondly, areas where many trees are planted can become biodiversity voids and havens for predator birds and mammals. Thirdly, there appears to be no oversight, so anyone can plant any kind of tree wherever they like, regardless of the conditions on the ground.

The mass-planting mentioned earlier in the Schemes chapter is an example of how this can go disastrously wrong.

"They ask you to plant trees on common land, well that's fine except it depends on planting the right tree in the right place," says Viv Lewis of the Federation of Cumbria Commoners. "We know of cases where tree planting is failing because they're not necessarily planted in the best places and farmers' local knowledge isn't taken into account. Farmers can feel imposed on and even though they know some of the areas where trees are being planted are not great, they go along with it because they are used to Natural England not listening to them."

The other major green trend – rewilding – is not quite as destructive. While it is often portrayed as progress, many rewilded areas are simply left alone and unmanaged. There are obvious problems with this 'technique', especially when neither Lowther nor RSPB are fond of pest control. Once a farm is shut down and healthy fertile land rewilded, neighbouring farms suffer.

"Lowther Estates [is] rewilding everything [and] done away with probably 5,000 mule ewes and 300 suckler cows," says John. "They're getting something like £500, £550 a hectare and just letting it all waste - good productive land. But the amount of vermin that's in there [is large] and there's nothing in there for them to eat... So us guys in the middle get absolutely hammered."

John was in two schemes that were sold to him as conservation, yet all he's seen after 20 years of failures, is more damage to the environment and a huge drop in his bank balance. To him, rewilding makes little sense. "I have nothing against conservation and helping nature, but just blanket rewilding is a non-starter. You're trying to turn the clock back. How far are you going to turn it back? Are you going to stop people having electricity, having the internet? They've actually released [in August 2023], I think 350 water voles around Haweswater. They'll be hoovered up in no time – the amount of vermin there is, the minks on the rivers and the foxes."

It's highly unlikely these land management experiments will have any effect on the climate, yet millions of pounds of public money are poured into

them. The farmers squeezed into joining are losing revenue and struggling to get by.

Day is wary of Cumbria's pledge to be net zero by 2037. The Farmer Network and other farming and rural organisations are trying to comply: "Too many people with strong opinions have too little knowledge about the farming sector and there are some who are using the opportunity to promote other agendas such as plant-based diets against balanced diets including red meat and dairy being just one example."

Asking farmers to adapt to climate change and improve nature is the right thing to do, says Day, but not at the expense of their farm business or - as some want - a total end to livestock production. He says this will never happen as it's clear demand for meat and dairy continues to rise as the global population increases.

The problem seems to be incentives to 'go green' based on the policy of the day, according to former Lowther head gamekeeper Brian Redhead: "If the government comes up with a scheme and says to the farmer, we'll give you £50 an acre if you plant potatoes, we'll give you £75 an acre if you plant trees, because trees are the thing to do. There are quite a lot of agricultural fields that are now planted with trees, which personally myself, I don't agree with."

"The income from farming in the uplands is marginal," says Lewis. "The income from delivering Natural England's scheme can make an important contribution to the business. So sometimes farmers go for the money knowing it's not necessarily the right thing for the farm."

Not everyone is enticed by the money. "The only way you could get money out of the [latest] scheme was by planting trees," says Bill. "To get enough money to convince people to go in, we had to plant a lot of trees and then even though we sort of agreed the areas where they could be planted, nobody was really that happy about it. So we ended up not going into a scheme, which probably lost me personally about £30,000 a year."

Bill is one of the growing number of critics who see tree planting and similar initiatives as a waste of time. "It is nonsense," he says. "A lot of things that we've seen in farming that we thought were nonsense but as soon as people start trading in them, they do have a value. So once one person buys some carbon credits off a farmer, they then have a value and people will trade it. You know, we saw it with milk when they brought the

milk quotas in and suddenly people were dealing in milk quotas... People were renting it out and selling it and buying it. Same with sheep premium quota and those sort of things. They come and go, but that's the one that's come in at the moment."

Lowther Estates was already making money from tree planting subsidies when Charlie, another scheme farmer, spotted a way the company was doubling it. "I don't know how right it was [but] you could buy a tree or plant a tree and that like helped towards your carbon offset kind of thing. There's no paperwork... But you donated £5 for them to plant a tree that they were already getting paid [to plant]."

Pressure on rural land use and the farming sector also comes from renewable energy companies, who are constantly sniffing out money-making opportunities. Often their public consultations suggest covering huge areas of farmland with solar panels right next to villages.

Peter Noble: "It's how you spin the publicity to get people on board with your thinking and if you can convince all the world that we need to plant trees to save the world, then a lot of people who probably don't think as much as they should do, just take this on. Nobody ever questions it."

Despite the issues farmers are having, Day is optimistic the government's plan for cheaper, higher quality food, is achievable. "We really can have it all," he says. "With the right political will, enough financial support in the rural economy to make it happen, and the learning of new skills in the agriculture sector. Such investment will enable us to produce more quality food from less inputs, improve our soils, create more habitats on farms and improve water and air quality in one package and under one portfolio." However, he admits there is "a long way to go".

"They're getting something like £500-£550 a hectare and just letting it all waste - good productive land."

JOHN, FARMER

## Summary

- Rewilding attracts vermin that will target reintroduced animals, such as water voles
- Corporations suspected of snapping up land to rake in green subsidies
- Most schemes involve tree planting on healthy crop fields
- Lowther suspected of charging people money to plant trees which the company was already getting subsidies for planting





# RSPB

Stepping out of the car on a sunny summer afternoon at Haweswater, there's an eerie silence. It's supposed to be an RSPB nature reserve. Where are the birds?

"The main reason there's no bird life up there is because all the protected species are predators," says Bampton farmer Peter Noble. "Everything is protected, nobody controls the birds any more and the only birds that you'll see at Haweswater are buzzards, which are absolutely a magnificent bird to watch but don't really need protecting, carrion crows, which cause a pretty substantial amount of damage... The rest are seagulls, magpies or jackdaws, ravens - nothing that needs looking after... There's no ground-nesting birds and hasn't been because the badgers have been protected for years."

Despite a poor record of wildlife conservation, RSPB is seen to have credibility. Attaching its questionable credentials to schemes on United Utilities land makes it easier for the company to further its agenda.

In July 2023, UU threatened to ban grouse shooting on its property. RSPB has been demanding the same thing for years – or introducing a licensing system which would probably amount to the same thing. As has been seen several times on land RSPB takes over from grouse shooting estates, nature suffers dramatically.

"If the grouse [shooting] went down the pan, nationally what would they do with the land?" asks former Lowther Estates keeper Brian Redhead. "They'd plant trees on it for this carbon [capture], to get payment for whatever. But the thing is, you've already lost that habitat completely for loads of stuff... That's where the only curlews are - up on the grouse moors. You go way up here or up top on the Pennines, there's masses of curlews, red shank, golden plover... They do away with that habitat to grow what? To grow spruce that'll blow over when they're 30 years old? And nothing lives under them – they're as black as the ace of spades. It's stupid."

The Lake District was created by farmers. Its carefully-manicured landscape has earned UNESCO status after more than a millennium of toil. Yet the RSPB, which has been in the region a relatively short time, demands some credit. It is also convinced it can improve the

"There's no ground-nesting birds and hasn't been because the badgers have been protected for years." PETER NOBLE, FARMER

Lakes by destroying the patchwork of farmed fells and replacing it with rewilded and tree-covered fields. It's a task that defies logic and puts the organisation at odds with locals, some of whom belong to families that have farmed the hills for hundreds of years.

"The first people to jump on the bandwagon of the World Heritage Site, are UU and RSPB saying that this is because we've got the Lake District in such a beautiful condition," complains Noble. "That's utter rubbish because the Lake District is in the condition it's in because of generations of work, not just somebody's idea in the last five years."

"What annoys me is the way conservation bodies over-claim what they are doing," says Viv Lewis of the Federation of Cumbria Commoners. "If you go to Naddle farm managed by RSPB it has Atlantic Oak woodland which is quite rare and been there forever. It's designated as SSSI and the previous tenant was paid to protect it. On a visit to Naddle I heard RSPB staff saying they are protecting the woodland, as if it wasn't before!"

The RSPB's habit of releasing anti-farming statements has been overlooked by the public and the media and it has managed to convince local authorities that the schemes it runs will benefit farming, habitats, wildlife, people and the environment. The few critics who seem to spot the negative effects are those who live in the countryside and are most affected by the schemes and farm closures the charity is promoting.

In several media articles, the RSPB boasted that its rewinding of the river at Swindale was the reason salmon were spawning there after an apparent break. Locals were not impressed by the achievement.

"They've rewound the river at Swindale and there's salmon up there now," says retired Lowther Estates head keeper Brian Redhead. "There always was salmon that went to spawn up there."

A local angler agrees: "When they showed us a few years ago... they had a fish counter with a camera on. To this day, I don't think it works. So the thing is, they're blowing their trumpet and about fish spawning above it, but there's no more fish spawning above it

than what there was when before they put it in. So it's a farce, really."

"There's certain things that they've done within that area that were basically what you would class as more or less environmental vandalism," the angler continues. "They decided to take out a river bank and put a crump weir in it just to let it flood and that caused a lot of damage and it was all under this guise of the Haweswater project with ERT (Eden Rivers Trust) and RSPB involved. There was a lot of stink."

One of the main reasons the RSPB is not trusted is a common one in rural communities – people objecting to decisions that affect their livelihoods being made by politicians or organisations based in cities miles away. "I wouldn't make any decisions about London because I don't know anything about London," says Peter Noble. "I do think that local knowledge and historical knowledge needs to be taken on board a lot more than it is. UU banned trail hunting up here. I don't agree with fox hunting but they've done it for hundreds of years and to be quite honest, the hunt





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catch next to no foxes regardless, it's more of a day out.” Trail hunting is an activity rooted in hundreds of years of tradition in the region, with many locals regarding it as an integral part of their community. According to Nobel: “You want a jolly up and it's quite good for the community in all fairness, but it's been banned on all RSPB, all UU land and probably influenced by RSPB. You don't want to upset contributors.”

Despite the bans, RSPB predator control includes foxes. “The guy who used to tenant Naddle and Swindale, the farming side of it for [RSPB], he said they would set squirrel traps to catch the grey squirrels,” recalls Noble. “Unfortunately a red squirrel got into the trap on the Friday, had nothing [to eat] until Monday, so it was subsequently dead. But that's never publicised. People probably wouldn't donate as much if they realise what actually does go on... The amount of deer on the fell is colossal and since they've killed all the trees that they planted, now RSPB are talking about a last deer. I bet that's not publicised either.”

“The more sheep we take off, the greater the deer numbers are,” says John. “Lowther... have been culling them as hard as they can the last few years. They shot 250 last season out here. It hasn't made a difference... What is the point in taking sheep off just to fill that gap with deer numbers? The deer do far more damage than the sheep will ever do.”

### Summary

- RSPB's inconsistent pest control policies confuse critics and put wildlife in harm's way
- RSPB takes credit for hundreds of years of Lake District land management
- Media-hungry charity makes misleading claims in press coverage

# Lowther Estates

With Jim Lowther a sitting RSPB trustee, it's probably no coincidence Lowther Estates is pushing policies almost identical to those of the charity and United Utilities. The company has been ruthless in its refusal to relet land to farmers. Instead, it's planting trees and rewilding, turning farms into worthless wastelands crawling with common predators. At the same time, Lowther is pocketing a substantial amount of public money through government green subsidies.

Looking across the valley from Bampton, the hillside – once prime farmland - looks dead, except for one of the last farms. When its lease runs out, that too is likely to be taken out of the game under the direction of mercenary CEO David Bliss, who seems uninterested in maintaining the Lake District's appearance.

By all accounts, any perceived bad behaviour by UU pales in comparison to Lowther's conduct.

“To a certain extent it's not going to bother [Lowther and UU] if the tourists don't come and neither of em seem particularly worried about their own reputations these days,” says Bill. “That's the sort of person you're up against. [Lowther CEO David Bliss is] doesn't care what everybody else thinks. He doesn't care about cultural heritage or farming or anything like that. He's just out there to get as much money as he can through not farming and planting trees and stuff.”

Apart from RSPB's initial takeover of the farms at Naddle and Swindale, Lowther has been leading the

campaign against farmers. UU has not actually forced anyone out other than a tenant with mental health issues after he set his house on fire, almost killing himself.

Jim Lowther has a bad name in Penrith after the original plan to build Sainsbury's lost financial backing and turned the centre of the town into a building site for more than a year. The family members are also said to be at war with each other, with one side encouraging agriculture and Jim Lowther's side, which just wants money.

While it has yet to confirm anything publicly, it's well-known through leaks from Lowther employees that it is not interested in farming. Yet scheme information such as that for the Arc project continue to claim it's benefitting farmers, rural economies and the environment.

“Neither [Lowther nor UU] seem particularly worried about their own reputations these days.”

BILL, FARMER

### Summary

- Lowther not interested in farming
- Lowther not interested in conservation
- Lowther not interested in cultural heritage
- Lowther wants farmers out, so it can make money from subsidies with little effort





# Associated risks

“You tell ‘em but they won’t listen. They think we are stupid.” TONY WILLIAMS, GAMEKEEPER

## Wildfires

Heather on moors like Wetsleddale is overgrown, with fewer sheep grazing and no controlled burning because of RSPB’s unwillingness to recognise its benefits. Farmers and gamekeepers have warned United Utilities and the charity about the potential for devastating and deadly wildfires at spots popular with walkers, campers, bird watchers and sheep but so far their concerns have been completely ignored.

“Because it hasn’t had any burning for four years, all the heather’s growing and growing and growing,” says former Lowther gamekeeper Tony Williams. “In another four or five years it’ll be up here and a horrendous fire risk. So if there’s ever a fire up here, it could take half the moor out so they’ll lose all the vegetation that they’ve got for holding the water and probably a lot of the peat as well. And this is what they can’t seem to understand. You tell ‘em but they won’t listen. They think we are stupid.”

While on the SSSI moor with Tony Williams, we could see people on the edge who had built a camp fire. With the right conditions, it wouldn’t take much for an accident that could lead to an uncontrollable blaze breaking out.

At some farms in Bampton Valley, sheep numbers have been cut because they’re in schemes and controlled burning is also prohibited. With nothing grazing and no muirburn, the heather and grass won’t need much encouragement to go up in flames. UU has repeatedly been warned of the danger.

“Has been raised with them on a few occasions,” says Bill. “You’re going to have wildfires and they sort of almost say, oh don’t be silly and move on to something else.”

“They’re not bothered about [fires],” says John, also in Bampton. “All they’re interested in is water. We’ve told them for years there’ll be a wildfire and the whole lot will go because it’s not getting grazed properly. There’s so much ungrazed grass left over winter and then spring and summer comes and there’ll be nothing anybody can do about it and the wildlife that’ll get destroyed there, plus any sheep... There’s no common sense.”

## Summary

- Controlled burning banned by RSPB
- Heather and grass growing out of control
- UU regularly warned in meetings with farmers, response is effectively “don’t be silly”

## Food supply

A major disruption to the UK’s food supply would have disastrous consequences – national security in jeopardy, social unrest, crime sprees, looting, etc. United Utilities and Lowther are destroying healthy farmland to rewild or plant trees for free public money. There are few conservation benefits from their actions.

As managing director of the Farmer Network, Adam Day knows agriculture inside out. He explains the vital role Lake District sheep play in the country’s food supply: “A hill sheep on a grazed common is... never going to produce the highest-value product be it meat or wool, but it’s going to produce a product that is very valuable... The stratification of the entire UK sheep industry is predicated around the hill ewe. In her life, the hill sheep moves from high to low. When she becomes too old to survive another winter on the fell, her life does not end there. She is sold on to lowland farms where she will continue to breed lambs. Her hardiness and thriftiness manifest in her lambs. Each autumn thousands of lowland farmers from across the UK descend on counties like Cumbria to buy female lambs bred from the hill ewe. They are taken home to become the backbone of sheep flocks from Cornwall to Caithness... Remember the hotels, bed and breakfasts, pubs and shops that benefit when farmers make their pilgrimage.”

“At a time when demand for sheep meat is growing, this seems to be a crazy step backwards,” Day says. “Yet here we are at every turn, farmers being asked to reduce hill flock numbers or in some cases get rid of entire flocks in the name of the environment.”

He thinks it is madness to remove hefted sheep flocks. There’s a dramatic effect on farmers and communities and even the remaining sheep on the hills can suffer challenges when the status quo developed over generations disappears. Day says some estates have been honest enough to admit to him that their future is in carbon credits, trees and biodiversity gains instead of traditional tenant farming.

“In some cases farmers may be offered employment contracts to farm for the estates rather than as their individual or family businesses,” he adds. “For some this will be an opportunity, for others it will be a disaster.”

Once the land has been resumed, trees will be planted on formerly crop-yielding fields, irreversibly damaging the land. Bampton farm owner Peter Noble questions the logic of planting trees on good land: “If this is the correct thing to do to save the planet, which I

don’t believe for a second, why aren’t you doing it off your own back? You’re getting paid to do it... If the government changes policy tomorrow and says we need to plant all of the land we’ve got and produce crops, all of the rewilding will be knocked on the head and out the window. It’s entirely money-oriented. It’s not saving the planet, it’s not doing anything. It’s just good publicity spin and people need to realise it’s all lies.”

“It is sad to see some organisations clearly placing nature above people.”

ADAM DAY, FARMER NETWORK

Former Lowther head gamekeeper Brian Redhead points out the future need to rely on imported food if the current ‘green’ trends continue: “I don’t think there’s any reason or cause or need to plant, to pay money out to create a vast forest because we want to create what there was 500 years ago, 1,000 years ago, whatever. To create all that on a perfectly good field that you could plough and grow food on to feed the people here. So we have to import more stuff because we’ve planted trees on there and it does away with habitat.”



Bill joined two schemes but has shunned the so-called Arc scheme, concerned that once again, it will involve blanketing farmland with trees. He suggests that once land has been covered in trees or rewilded, taxpayer-funded subsidies will continue to flow in, even though the landowners are doing very little.

"Normally after the scheme finishes, you can then effectively do whatever you like," he says. "So in order for you to not cut all those trees down and dig 'em all up and put it back into farming, they will have to pay you a maintenance fee, I guess... Not really sustainable is it? We talk about sustainable farming and sustainable farming doesn't involve big payouts for doing nothing."

The damage being done is practically irreversible, according to John: "These thousands of acres on Lowther Estates, they're gone into woodland pasture and planted trees... A lot of that was good 'ploughable' land or growing barley or wheat on it. But once those trees are established, the roots are going to knacker the drainage systems up for the fields and everything."

"You can't then turn it back to farming very easily because all those trees [after] 10 years," Bill says, "there'll be more tree under the ground than there is above it, so... you'd have to dig all those trees up to be able to turn it back to farmland again. So it's pretty irreversible."

Day says we should celebrate the fact the UK has a relatively warm and temperate climate which allows productive counties like Cumbria to produce more food, grow trees and improve the natural landscape. Instead,

he says it feels like a real challenge: "Cumbria has been farmed for over 6,000 years. Now in the space of only a handful of years, we seem to have turned all of our focus onto the environment and there is a large amount of money in it for some. Add that to the expectation of even greater investment in the rural sector in the name of nature and climate change and it is not difficult to see that farming in Cumbria and indeed across the country is under threat."

"This, says Day, is the biggest concern. If we cannot guarantee food security in the next few decades, we may face a time when we become hungry. A time when cheap imported food is no longer there. The effect on people and the natural environment could be catastrophic. It would take many more decades to return the land to food production than it does right now to turn the land into woodlands or commercial forest. It is sad to see some organisations clearly placing nature above people. Community matters just as much. We urgently need to find the right balance to farm and conserve with trust and cooperation. Right now, in parts of Cumbria, this feels further away than ever."

### Summary

- Sheep cuts affect whole country, as there are fewer to breed with lowland sheep
- Farmers object to planting trees on good farmland, which causes irreversible damage

## Water pollution

United Utilities and RSPB say the schemes Haweswater farmers are pressured into joining will clean up the water supply by minimising the amount of sheep urine that enters the lake. The farmers say that's nonsense.

UU's other major complaint is about the amount of peat it needs to remove. This stems from its failure to modernise archaic facilities, something that cannot be blamed on the farmers. Bearing in mind the amount of money the company is making from green subsidies and selling water it gets for free, upgrading water treatment plants should not eat into profits much.

Farmers are fed up with UU and RSPB publicly accusing them of polluting Haweswater.

"The dam has been up almost 100 years," says Peter Noble. "[It] was built in a peat valley. We do occasionally get floods that will take a bit of peat into the lake without a doubt. But the entirety of the lake floor is peat anyway... So what you've got is a constant circulation of the peat on the bottom of the lake, which yet again, is out of our control. They're saying they're taking out hundreds of tons of peat per year. Unfortunately, that's their problem, isn't it? If I've got a problem here, then I have to deal with it and I have to pay for it... The last estimate I heard was about £40 million to alter the Watchgate treatment works to be able to cope with it. UU's profits are hundreds of millions, so £40 million is not really that much in the grand scheme of things."

Besides that, Noble has proof the farmers are not polluting the water. "We did an independent survey as the graziers, of the intakes around the lake," he says. "Well just on Bampton common from the top of the lake round to Heltondale and sent it off to an independent chap... who sent it to UU's own testing department at Warrington. The water all came back as perfectly clear."

At the same time, water being pumped between the lakes through UU's system appears to have spread an algae that's deadly to dogs.

"The pumping station is there, obviously to do a job," says Noble. "They can pump water from Haweswater to Ullswater or vice versa, through the tunnel that goes through the mountains. We had the craziest meeting last year where UU's own land agent denied that they pumped water from Ullswater to Haweswater. Now there's been blue green algae in Haweswater for a little



while... allegedly. I brought that up in the meeting, how did this happen? Surely that is due to you pumping water from one to the other and the land agent denied they pump water.

"Below the UU treatment works, there's no life in the river," Noble continues. "That is the water they are allowing to flow into Windermere. So it's the absolute hypocrisy of the whole thing. You can stand in a meeting and claim you're trying to save the environment and look after wildlife, look after everything else in one hand and then on the other hand, you're actually responsible for killing most of it."

There are numerous health issues attributed to microplastics, the kind that were in the 100,000 or so tree guards mentioned in the Schemes chapter. According to new research published at a recent conference of the American Neurological Association (ANA), microplastics have been linked to the sharp rise of neurodegenerative conditions like dementia, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's. Numerous studies have also linked microplastics to increasing rates of cancer, infertility, and inflammation, among other health risks.

### Summary

- UU complains of peat in the lake, which was formed on peatland
- Independent water quality tests show the water coming off the fells and into the lake is clean
- UU has not updated its sewage network to a standard capable of handling the growing population
- Microplastics, like those from tree guards, are linked to health problems

"Below the United Utilities treatment works, there's no life in the river."

PETER NOBLE,  
FARMER





## Flooding

Every winter, when the snow melts, Haweswater reservoir overflows, flooding Bampton Valley below the water catchment line. None of those farms is owned by United Utilities. RSPB is said to be interested in buying one.

The water level at Haweswater is routinely full because UU wants it to look nice for visitors. The dam can release water during the colder months in case of avalanches or heavy rain on snow leading to increased intake.

For the farmers who live and work in the valley, it's a problem that goes back generations. However, a tedious pattern has emerged since UU took over the dam. Their fields are flooded and fences are now destroyed every year.

They can't insure themselves against this because they're told it's an 'act of God'. While UU's executives may command deity status in the office, the flooding is entirely due to bad dam management. Their divine intervention could prevent unnecessary hardship – both physical and financial – on their neighbours. At the same time, the company is happy to reap the rewards from other 'acts of god', such as rain, wind and sunlight.

"Pete Noble, he's no UU fan," says John. "Most of his land's down in the bottom of the valley and the way that the levels in the reservoir are managed over the winter, his place gets flooded out several times every year. It's just purely, from my point of view, poor management of the water levels being kept in the dam. They'll sit with it brim full of water and there's absolutely no need for that. If it was kept 10 feet down, when we do have a big storm and a lot of rain comes, it's got the capacity to take the runoff from the fells. But to sit with it being full and then we get a storm. It's got nowhere to go but over the top of the reservoir and it just floods the whole valley out. And his place gets wrecked every winter."

Peter Noble: "All my fences get washed away... I can't get any compensation for that. I just get, that's tough. Act of God. And it's not tough, act of God nowadays because the weather forecast is so good that you could release the water out the dam a week earlier and leave enough space to catch most of the flood water. But they refuse to."

**"It's poor management of the water levels being kept in the dam."** JOHN, FARMER

## Disease

Sheep have many uses. One of them seems to be attracting ticks, which are then killed when the sheep are dipped. Removing the sheep from the fells can arguably create excess ticks that risk latching onto other wildlife or walkers.

"There's a lot of knock-on effects," says Peter Noble. "I've spoken to people in Scotland who've said that this is exactly what the RSPB did where they ban everything. They wanted all the sheep off. Then all of a sudden they find that the ticks absolutely massacre all the wildlife, because the sheep's an easy option to take on. So now they have to put sheep back on the fell to Hoover up the ticks every year. Just put 'em on when

the tick rises the highest, put 'em on, fetch 'em back off and dip the sheep. Speaking to a lot of the guys on the east fells where it was all grouse shooting, the government directive was to remove all the sheep... All the young grouse got ticks and that killed them. Shooting's not really a big interest of mine either, but the fact is, it's quite a colossal business."

## Summary

- Removing sheep raises risk of other wildlife dying from ticks, including grouse on shoot moors



## Summary

- UU keeps dam full for purely aesthetic reasons
- Farms below catchment cannot insure against routine damage from floods

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