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By Fred Searle

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NFU calls for delay to end of support payments



Minette Batters

Union urges government to postpone as there is no guarantee legislation will be in place to start transition to new farm support system in 2021

The NFU is calling for Defra to delay its planned phasing out of farm support payments, after the government's decision not to carry forward the current version of the Agriculture Bill into the next session of Parliament.

The Government failed to present a motion to MPs to carry over the existing bill, which has been shelved since completing its committee stage last November.

This means a new version of the bill will need to be reintroduced in the next Queen's Speech and restart its legislative passage, making it possible farmers could be left without any support payments at all for a period.

Under the bill, farm support payments were due to be phased out from 2021 but NFU president Minette Batters said it was "unreasonable" to continue to plan for the phasing out of the current system on the present timetable.

Batters said: "With the fall of the Agriculture Bill, there is no guarantee at all that the legislation will be in place to enable the government to begin its planned transition to a new farm support system in 2021.

"It is totally unreasonable to keep farmers in a state of uncertainty about what system might be in place from 2021.

"We are proposing the government's plans to move away from the current system are postponed by at least a year, to run from 2022 to 2028. We hope that continued uncertainty will not require a postponement of more than a year."

She added that the proposed new system for payments based on environmental goods rather than land ownership was based on the UK leaving the EU "in an orderly fashion in March 2019" and entering a "stable transition period" for at least two years.

"That is obviously now a distant memory," she said. "There is every chance we could find ourselves leaving without a deal, facing huge economic disruption with farms struggling to remain viable.

"That is not the time to start dismantling the support system that has provided such important stability for many farm businesses."

She stressed the NFU remains committed to helping develop a sustainable farming system in the UK "for decades to come" but argued this is impossible at the moment since so much government time and resource is focused on managing the Brexit process and the potential impact of no deal.

"Rushing the reform programme in the absence of any legal framework and with the outcome of Brexit still so uncertain could fatally undermine this hugely important piece of work," she said.