



*Image Credit: Neal Warnock*

## **Blog: To secure farm incomes, the environment is key**

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Figures published recently have revealed that farm incomes in Northern Ireland in 2018 have fallen by 23% from 2017. This is a significant downturn, representing an average drop in farm income of around £7,800. These figures highlight what a challenging year it's been for farming in NI. 2017/18 was plagued by extreme weather events, with a wet winter, the Beast from the East in the spring, and a prolonged heatwave and summer drought.

As a result, many farmers have experienced significant pressure on their businesses. The wet and cold spring meant that many livestock farmers were using stores of winter feed early, whilst the drought of the summer heatwave impacted grass production, adding to the need for additional inputs.

This has been compounded by the rising cost of feed, driven by events in supply countries around [the world](#).

Nature Matters NI agrees that this year's events should act as a ["wake up call"](#) for farming in Northern Ireland and that such a reduction in farm income "poses a threat to the very backbone" of some of our most important sectors.

We need to create a farming system in NI which ensures that farming here is sustainable in the long term, in which farming can be profitable, resilient and environmentally sustainable.

To get there, it is imperative that a new support system recognises the crucial role that environmental management can play in supporting profitable, resilient farming. This is crucially important when facing a changing climate and an increasingly volatile marketplace.

In some sectors, this may represent a significant refocus on how businesses operate. Numerous examples demonstrate how hill farms working within natural limits have seen significant improvements to livestock health, biodiversity and overall [cashflow](#). For these farms a reduction in herd size and a focus on breeds suited to the landscape and positive environmental management have reaped [significant rewards](#). With fewer heads of stock, the need for additional feed drops, as well as other costs such as fertiliser inputs and vet bills, leads to an increase in profitability. Consequently, in many cases the environment also benefits, with potential increases in biodiversity, improved water quality and increased carbon storage due to a reduction in intensity, making the landscape more resilient to the extreme weather events caused by climate change in the long term.

Under a future policy, with targeted support and advice, farmers could maximise the environmental benefits provided by their land and receive public support for this work. This would provide a stable reliable income stream in the face of a volatile and unpredictable market.

A future agricultural policy for Northern Ireland must seek solutions to many of the problems facing farming and the countryside. A new system needs to ensure greater support for farming practises that work to restore and enhance the environment. It must be recognised that these systems can significantly benefit a farm's bottom line. Nature Matters NI will be carrying out research to provide further policy recommendations which will help secure the sustainability and profitability of the sector in the long term.