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Groundhog day for environment sector as post-Brexit farming once again dominates conference season

Written by Ben Rayner, Political Consultant on 21 September 2017



As the focus shifts from Westminster to Brighton and Manchester for the annual festivities of the party conference season, it is Groundhog Day all over again for the environmental sector, with the same issues as last year set to dominate the agenda. The main, yet still unanswered question facing legislators will be can Britain create a more self-sufficient farming sector which balances the need for environmental success while feeding an ever-growing population.

For the Government, that answer lies in the much-anticipated Agriculture Bill, which will introduce a new farming system to replace the Common Agricultural Policy. While the first glimpse of a white paper is not expected till the new year, it remains to be seen if Environment Secretary Michael Gove will use conference as an opportunity to preview some of his ideas.

A perfect opportunity may be presented to him as he continues DEFRA tradition by facing the NFU rank and file at their annual fringe event. With numerous environmental groups set to be attending it will be interesting to see if any government ministers disclose a date for the infamous 25-year plan for the environment, nearly two years since its original publication date.

When the manifestos were published, there was not a lot for animal welfare advocates to be hopeful

about with another battle over the Hunting Act looming. However, following the election Gove has given them something to be optimistic about by announcing there won't be a repeal vote and indicating a possible shift in policy both on animal cruelty sentencing and the ivory trade. Conference may well present an opportunity for campaigners to take the initiative and push Ministers further.

As the Labour Party gather in Brighton, the limelight will be on Shadow DEFRA Secretary Sue Hayman as she hopes to expand on the environmental manifesto the party prepared at the general election. Increasing her public profile in recent months, she will also address NFU members and discuss her plans for British agriculture which include plans to extend the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator and re-establish the seasonal agricultural workers scheme.

The party will also look to set out its stance on the Agriculture Bill, with Hayman having already made clear her intentions to seek to amend the bill should the Government leave farmers without the subsidies and access to workers they need. As the Brexit clock continues to countdown, the sector will be waiting to see if any clear policies end up cutting through the political noise of party conference season. how the two major parties use their conference period as well as the key events to watch out for in the weeks ahead.

[Environment](#) ^[1]

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