



# Flooding and media storms – controversies over farming and upland land-use in the UK



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## ABSTRACT

This viewpoint considers the impacts of media coverage of last winter's flooding upon the farming community and the implications for their role as key partners in the delivery of landscape changes necessary to address flooding. The paper focuses on the experiences of the Pontbren farmers in Mid Wales, whose land is the site of a much-referenced study on the benefits of tree planting to address flood risk. It is argued that media sensationalism, and in many instances conflation of the science around this issue, has served to undermine good-will and engagement from farmers. Consequently, this viewpoint emphasises the importance of highlighting synergies as starting points for dialogue; as is the case when negotiating all forms of landscape multifunctionality.

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Last winter's extreme weather has once again prioritised questions of flood remediation and resilient land-use amongst policy makers and affected communities. December 2015 was reported as the wettest month on record (Met Office, 2015), coming only a year after earlier 'record breaking' floods affected many communities in the UK (Met Office and CEH, 2014). Whilst controversy over responsibility has affected all actors across the catchment system, including those at the level of national government (see e.g. Shukman, 2015), a notable emphasis has been placed on the question of upstream land-use. George Monbiot has been one of the most prolific and vocal commentators, writing in a range of media outlets from the Mail Online to the Guardian and Twitter (2013; 2014; 2015a,b; 2016), targeting his critique at upland sheep farming:

*"... money devoted to freshwater flood relief is being spent at the bottom of river catchments... A rational policy would address the problem upstream. A study in mid-Wales suggests that rainwater's infiltration rate into the soil is 67 times higher under trees than under sheep pasture... But Cumbria's hills are almost entirely treeless, and taxpayers, through the subsidy regime, pay farmers to keep them that way." (2015a)*

More venomously, he has described the British uplands as 'sheepwrecked' contending that:

*"... we pay billions to service a national obsession with sheep, in return for which the woolly maggots kindly trash the countryside. The white plague has done more extensive environmental damage than all the building that has ever taken place here... Upland grazing, in other words, contributes to a cycle of flood and drought." (2013)*

Whilst others have been less provocative in their coverage of these issues, there have been numerous aligned claims for the benefits of tree planting in the uplands, including arguments presented by the technical director of Confor,<sup>1</sup> in the Scotsman on January 26th 2016; on the BBC's nature programme Winter Watch on 28th January; and by the Minister for floods Rory Stewart (see Lean, 2016).

This viewpoint considers the impacts of such media coverage upon the farming community, as key partners in the delivery of landscape changes necessary to address flooding. Specifically, it is argued that media sensationalism, and in many instances conflation of the science around this issue, has served to undermine good-will and engagement from farmers. This includes those involved with the flagship Pontbren Project<sup>2</sup> which Monbiot (2014) and others have applauded. Pontbren is also referred to as the site

<sup>1</sup> Federation of Forest Industries <http://www.confor.org.uk/> [last accessed 18/5/16].

<sup>2</sup> Pontbren is a farmer led initiative which resulted in the planting of 120,000 trees and 16.5 km of hedges across 1000 ha's in the uplands of Mid Wales. See <http://www.coedcymru.org.uk/images/user/5472%20Pontbren%20CS%20v12.pdf> [last accessed 18/5/16].

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of the study in the above quote from Monbiot (2015a) and data from research conducted there (e.g. Carroll et al., 2004; Marshall et al., 2009, 2014) has similarly been cited by other recent media publications on flooding and tree planting.

Whilst such coverage has not been evident across the full spectrum of media outlets, it has been clearly noted in the farming press. This has resulted in continued backlash against what is perceived as an attack on the farming way of life (see e.g. Davies, 2015; Driver, 2015). Productive dialogues are not, therefore, seen to be forthcoming. But, as this paper argues, they are much needed if progress is to be made. Given that a range of actors are now involving themselves in strategies for upland land use to mitigate flooding,<sup>3</sup> it is pertinent to take stock of the issues encountered and the effects of coverage so far.

This viewpoint has been informed by a review of the existing natural science evidence-base on trees and flooding, by researchers on the Multi-Land project at Bangor University (Ford et al., 2016), and social science research on farmers' responses to tree planting and land-use change (e.g. Walker-Springett and Parkhill, 2014 Wynne-Jones, 2013a,b). In particular, insights from the Pontbren farmers are presented here from interviews undertaken with the farmers in 2013 (see WRO, 2014 for further details), and informal discussions (i.e. not involving recorded interviews) with the group's leader and spokesperson, Roger Jukes, in January 2016.

The centre-point of the argument presented is that the environmental benefits documented by researchers in the Pontbren catchment would not have been possible without the instigating role of the farmers to enable tree planting in the first instance. Subsequently, the farmers have been strong advocates of the land-use changes undertaken, hosting a wide range of visitors and supporting further research and publications, but they are now concerned that the messages reported in the press do not accurately capture their motivations and alienates both them and the wider farming community (personal communication Jan 2016).

The farmers came together as a group of ten in 2001, after earlier experimentation with hedgerow restoration on three neighbouring farms, and sought funding through the National Lottery to scale-up their aspirations for tree-planting. They were supported throughout this process by staff from Coed Cymru,<sup>4</sup> but the project was primarily farmer-led to meet their needs. From the outset, they asserted that tree planting should be undertaken as a means to provide shelter for livestock, as part of a broader shift to enable more resilient farming systems. The benefits to catchment hydrology were only realised subsequently and were not their initial motivation. The farmers are at pains to stress that the project was not singularly intended to produce 'environmental' benefits. In their own terms, the initial motivation was 'to get off the production treadmill' by returning to more traditional methods of farming, which included replanting hedges as shelter.

Even prior to the recent flooding, the need to engage farmers with tree planting had been highlighted as part of a more multifunctional, ecosystem service led approach to land-use and associated business planning (IWA, 2012). However, there have been difficulties. For example, within Wales only 13% of uptake on the Forestry Commission's Better Woods for Wales planting scheme came from farmers. In explanation, cultural factors are highlighted

as major barrier to engagement (Walker-Springett and Parkhill, 2014 Wynne-Jones, 2013a). Specifically, a wide base of research has highlighted that farmers' identity as food producers is an important cultural norm which needs to be taken into account when trying to facilitate farm business change (Burton 2004; Burton et al., 2008; Sutherland and Darnhofer 2012; Wynne-Jones 2013b). The Pontbren farmers appear no different, and their ability to communicate the success of their project has been on the basis of maintaining their status as 'good farmers' conforming to such parameters.

The tree planting work at Pontbren resulted in a 5% change in land-use. This has worked in synergy with the farmers' aims to maintain productive livestock businesses. Whilst precise economic comparators are not feasible with national level farm business statistics, it is evident that the land use changes undertaken through the Pontbren project have not compromised the financial viability of the farms (WRO, 2014). To the farmers' minds, recent media coverage has not sufficiently acknowledged the careful balance of this land-sharing approach, and they perceive that their story is being used as a means to advocate landscape transformations which do not offer such synergies i.e. a more wide-spread reforestation of the uplands and removal of livestock farming (personal communication Jan 2016).

*"Some of those people are quite... they are on their own wave with planting trees... I think it needs to be thought out and what is good for the farm, what is good for the countryside and you know... I was told by a farmer at the market that 'you lot have got us into trouble'... we provided years of feedback but we don't want it to be twisted the way it has been twisted."* (Interview June 2013)

*"We're having trouble with various bodies... They tried to use Pontbren for their own ends as an advertising tool for propaganda for planting trees and things. And to us and it's really annoying... I'm not happy about it... Hijacked. You know farmers up here read that [showing the interviewer an article that is perceived as 'misinformation' about Pontbren] and they think what bloody planet are [the Pontbren farmers] on? You know and I get a lot of that."* (Interview June 2013)

Critically, Monbiot (2014) has acknowledged the nuances of the Pontbren farmers' land-use and the rationale behind their decision making. He also attempts to make it clear that his recent outpourings are not intended to blame farmers, but the subsidy system that incentivises their behaviour (Monbiot, 2015b, 2016). However, this subtlety appears to have been lost in the resulting tabloid and social media storm (see Driver, 2015). The issue Monbiot tries to raise is with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) which requires farmers to keep the land clear of scrub and trees. Whilst there are other payments schemes available to promote tree planting (through the Welsh Glastir and English Countryside Stewardship schemes), these are now contradicted by the BPS stipulations<sup>5</sup> The future of all these payments is now completely uncertain in the wake of the UK Brexit vote. However, the continuation of such subsidies has long been uncertain, potentially jeopardising the whole future of upland livestock farming here. Whilst this point has been used to add further weight to the argument against sheep-farming (Monbiot, 2013), this is clearly exacerbating tensions and not supporting any productive discussion.

Reflecting on the role payment-schemes play, it is useful to note research on farmers' decision making that suggests finan-

<sup>3</sup> For example conservation NGO's such as the Woodland Trust <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blogs/woodland-trust/2015/12/flooding-progress-report-1/>, and Rewilding Britain <http://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/assets/uploads/files/publications/Rewilding%20and%20Flood%20Risk%20Management%20briefing.pdf>; along with research partnerships including Multi-Land funded by Welsh Government with researchers from Bangor University, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) and Aberystwyth University <http://www.nrn-icee.ac.uk/multi-land/> [last accessed 18/5/16].

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.coedcymru.org.uk/> [last accessed 18/5/16].

<sup>5</sup> Land covered by scrub or trees is now excluded from the area which is eligible for the BPS. There are concessions available through the government tree-planting schemes so farmers are not immediately penalised on their BPS, but it is not clear what the situation would be after the planting schemes end.

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