

Presentment – Verderers Court 16th December 2020

Tony Hockley, New Forest Commoner

Rural Payments Agency Consultation

I would like to register my personal thanks to the Court and others for their work over the past 10 months in lobbying for a solution to perverse incentives within the Basic Payments Scheme. The current consultation by the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) is a remarkable and very welcome response to the unique challenge faced by the New Forest.

When I first explained the additional perverse incentive for cattle numbers contained in DEFRA's February 2020 policy statement on the Agricultural Transition the local response was united and active. The Verderers in particular have maintained the pressure on ministers. It will have been important that my own letter to ministers in February (on behalf of the Commoners Defence Association) was followed by those from the Official Verderer, National Park Authority Chairman and the Deputy Surveyor. We also benefitted from the efforts of our MPs in lobbying ministers; Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP, Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP, and Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne TD MP. Without this unity and persistence it seems very unlikely that any action solely for the New Forest would have followed given current pressures on DEFRA and the RPA.

An end to the exploitation of the Basic Payments Scheme by a handful of people with large and growing cattle herds cannot come soon enough. The few playing the cattle-marking game take from the many struggling to sustain traditional small-scale cattle commoning.

Meanwhile the overall pot of BPS support for the New Forest continues to decline. Those gaming the system not only reduce the funding available to others, but also damage the reputation of the vocational commoning system upon which the culture and habitats of this extraordinary landscape depend. Good commoners take the blame for those who have used the BPS to add 2500 cows to the marking register since 2015. The intervention of the RPA is very welcome. The current situation must not be allowed to get worse before it gets better during the phasing out of the BPS to 2027.

Thanks to a united campaign those of us who feared the worst can now hope for the best.