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# FARMING

## for natural resilience

Achieving a balance between profitable yields and long term resilience has been a challenge for farmers for decades. **Martin Lines** CEO of the Nature Friendly Farmers Network has been talking to **Fergus Byrne** about effective change

When I catch up with Martin Lines, founder of the Nature Friendly Farmers Network (NFFN), he is hunched over his phone in London's Westminster Hall. With its medieval timber roof and history of Tudor feasts, banquets and state ceremonies—and more recently the setting for thousands of people to pay their respects to the late Queen Elizabeth II—it is not exactly a location with the same rustic atmosphere as a farm barn. There is no curly tinned roof and the friendly whiff of cow dung doesn't hang in the air, and although some may say there is often more than a hint of bullshit in Westminster, that is, of course, a matter of opinion. Regardless, Martin's first comment echoes my own initial impression when he says, 'You could certainly store a few ton of wheat in here.'

There are no agricultural products in view today however, but beyond its storage value, Martin is certainly in the right location to reach out to MPs, policy makers and civil servants to progress his goal of making them aware of what farmers do to feed the nation. This week he is here to participate in meetings and talk to just about anyone that

will listen to his story about how important it is to support farmers in their role as keepers of the environment.

A traditional farmer, he founded NFFN to unite farmers who were advocating for nature-friendly practices. Some time ago he transitioned his own farm to reduce pesticide use by 65%, herbicides by 85%, and fungicides by 50%, while remarkably, improving profitability and resilience.

He cites two particular moments that helped change his view of how he had been farming. 'We had a bean crop that was full of aphids that we couldn't spray because it was too wet and windy' he recalls. However, because he had planted flower margins, strips of land planted with flowers to attract 'beneficiaries, pollinators and predatory insects', he found that there were no aphids in the areas by the flower margins. 'So, I didn't put an insecticide on' he says, and it had no impact on his yield. Since that discovery he says he hasn't used insecticide for 11 years. 'Because if I'm delivering good habitats full of all the beneficiaries, pollinators and predatory insects, why would I want to put insecticide or product on that's going to kill most of

*'If you're losing 2- 3% of your best quality soil down the water course every year, it kind of buggers you up in a few years time'*



them?' Nature was doing the job for him.

The other road to Damascus moment was when he ploughed a field that hadn't been ploughed for a couple of years. He could see the tractor imprint of when it had been ploughed two years previously. The imprint was still solidly compacted into the soil. 'You could see the tread print of the tractor' he tells me. 'It was a wake-up moment that, actually, we are causing, through our tractors and our operations, soil compaction and soil degradation. Why the heck are we doing this? If we don't cause the problem, we aren't going to need to spend money on the bigger machinery. And that took me on a journey of basically stopping cultivating wherever possible, and building soil health and infiltration of water, organic matter, cover crops, and direct drilling where possible. And it's just taken me on a journey that nature doesn't cause big soil compaction.'

NFFN, which includes organic and conventional farmers, promotes progressive improvements in farming practices. Martin emphasizes the need for government support, consumer education, and collaboration with supply chains. He highlights the importance of soil health, biodiversity, and the role of livestock in sustainable farming. NFFN aims to influence policy, support farmers, and promote regenerative agriculture.

The birth of the organization began several years ago when many farmers were being taken to conservation events and, as he recalls, there was 'a lot of noise' from conservation groups that 'farming was bad.' On the farming side, he says, there was concern that conservation didn't understand farming. There was a lot of disagreement and mistrust, inevitably born out of misunderstanding, but it was creating an

uncomfortable polarization. Martin quickly realized there was a middle ground, a vacuum that needed to be filled.

He came across a survey that showed that many farmers felt their voice wasn't represented. There were farmers who had discovered that farming with nature rather than against it was supporting their production. It was actually improving their profitability. 'They were trying to find a middle path where nature fitted into their landscape,' he says.

So, Martin decided to form the network to bring those farming voices together, to support each other. He says that 'if you're an individual farmer in a landscape where you're doing different things to your neighbors, sometimes you're shunned, and the support isn't there. But collectively, we can have a really positive voice and demonstrate what can be done, while at the same time presenting a positive voice into governments and policymakers and supply chains.' NFFN is showing what can be done, but Martin wants to make sure 'the framework is in place that helps us deliver it.'

As an organization, NFFN has a wide breadth of members, both organic and conventional, as well as somewhere in between. They range from those with less than one acre to people farming 40 to 50,000 acres. 'We don't judge people,' says Martin, and neither does the organization audit their members. 'But we are very clear that it is about progressively improving your system that recognizes the role of nature, and the reduction, and for some removal of pesticides, and the role of livestock in that system to build fertility. We're not preaching at people, but what we try and do is show the practices that other farmers are already doing that will give you solutions.'





*Martin Lines*

Martin knows that not every farmer will want to make an immediate complete transition. 'For some, that may be stopping insecticides, but carrying on everything else, with some habitats,' he says, 'but for others that may be going down a biological farming system with no inputs, only focusing on biology.' He is keen to point out that it's not about yield, it's about profitability. 'I'm happy to see a reduction of one or two tons a hectare if that saves me £500 or £600 a hectare in cost.'

So, what are the key difficulties for farmers that might want to make changes from the systems they have been using for so many years? 'Mindset' says Martin. 'It's a huge amount of information to take in. If you're going to want to stop insecticides, you're going to have to put in some habitats and manage the habitat for the beneficiaries. So that may take a year or two before you can jump across. It's about putting those steps in place.'

But Martin is also aware of a sense of urgency, and a reality that the farming community has to face in the future. 'Change is coming' he warns. 'Our practices of the past will not be supported by the supply chain or the public or private finance in the future. So, we're going to have to adapt, and farmers who are adapting early are having time to adjust. Those that delay are going to have to change at a faster pace, and the impact of our climate and the government policies and supply chains, are going to have a bigger impact on them.'

'Today is the best day to start wherever you are,' he says. 'But take the steps that you can cope with and build some support around you.' That could include benefiting from information from other farmers and taking business planning advice, as well as gaining an

understanding of the impact and the changes that are happening to cash flow, to future machinery needs and 'to the new markets of opportunity that will be open to you as you change.'

'We've got to recognize that our current farming system has caused many of the problems for biodiversity; many of our soil health problems; our water health problems and other things. That's not going to be allowed to continue, and it's not sustainable for our own business. If you're losing 2-3% of your best quality soil down the water course every year, it kind of buggers you up in a few years time. So, we're going to have to get more resilient in a changing climate, to how we manage our landscape and our businesses.'

Outside the echoing hall of Westminster, Martin is using his knowledge and experience to ensure the impact of change is both recognized, coherent and collaborative. He stresses the ambition that is needed for change, and that means talking to MPs, civil servants, banks, finance institutions and those involved in routes to market. 'I recognize the change that's coming,' he says. 'But I need to make sure everybody that's involved with farming, from finance, supply chain and policy, all go in the same direction at a similar pace. And that has to be ambitious.'

*CEO of Nature Friendly Farming Network, Martin Lines will be joining a new conference called LandAlive which will be held at the Bath and West Showground on the 22nd and 23rd November 2024. It will feature a two-day programme of talks by top experts in regenerative farming and sustainable food. Tickets are available from [www.landalive.co.uk](http://www.landalive.co.uk).*