Regulation of Industrial Livestock Systems

The issue

Market demand for cheaper meat has driven the intensification of livestock systems. The true costs of this, on nature, air and water quality, and animal welfare, are not reflected in the cost of meat and dairy products on the supermarket shelves.

Significant parts of Welsh livestock production now operate on an industrial model, with over-reliance on external inputs of feed, fertiliser and medicines and operating at stocking densities that exceed the land's carrying capacity.

Intensive dairy farming in particular generates high volumes of slurry which contribute to river pollution. In poultry, 95% of the billion chickens farmed annually in the UK are reared in factory farms, producing manure that over-fertilises soils and causes phosphorous run-off, contributing to the destruction of freshwater ecosystems.

Why it matters to Wales

Phosphate pollution from agriculture has pushed over 60% of Wales's SAC rivers beyond safe phosphate limits, triggering a nutrient neutrality requirement that now blocks housing development across large parts of the country[1].

Nutrients lost from synthetic fertilisers and intensive livestock systems pollute waterways and cost farmers an estimated £420 million a year for nitrogen alone[2]. This comes at a time when average farm incomes in Wales are falling, creating pressure to intensify further. Official data shows the dairy sector is consolidating into fewer, more intensive farms and some operating with >1,000 head[3].

The Cleddau catchment is now Wales' most nutrient-polluted, driven by intensive dairy production. Between 2016 and 2022, 56% of the Western Cleddau's pollution incidents, and 72% of the Eastern Cleddau, were attributed to agriculture, with slurry being the primary pollutant. Increasing numbers of intensive poultry unit applications are now also being submitted in this part of Wales[4].

Alignment with Welsh policy context

Welsh Government is implementing the recommendations of the 2025 statutory review of the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations (CoAP)[5] which introduced what some call an 'all Wales Nitrate Vulnerable Zone'. The CoAP regulations note that mainly intensive dairy, beef and poultry farms hold livestock numbers that would exceed the regulated threshold for manure production.

Wales has not strengthened its planning policy to prohibit the installation of new Intensive Poultry Units (IPUs), but a ban would align with Wellbeing duties by taking a long-term view (protecting future generations), preventing further pollution/harm to ecosystems, and integrating environment, health, agriculture, and community concerns.

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Our perspective

Agroecology - the design of farming systems that work with nature rather than against it - offers a value-for-money solution for government and supply chain. Organic farming demonstrates a tried and tested model for delivery. Livestock can play an important role in agroecological farm systems, with lower stocking densities, better grazing management, more pasture access, minimal imported inputs and less reliance on synthetic fertilisers. We also want a level playing field, with fair incentives for farms that invest in higher welfare standards, environmental protection, or sustainable practices and targeted regulation to curb the proliferation of industrial livestock production models.

What we're doing about it

- Soil Association is a founding partner in the Sustainable Nitrogen Alliance[6].
- Through Wales Environment Link's Water group we have called for tighter agricultural permitting and regulation, and urgent action across the water system on all fronts.
- Head of Farming Cymru, Haydn Evans is a member of the CoAP Task and Finish group established by Welsh Government to implement the recommendations of the CoAP statutory review.
- Our most strongly supported public campaign, "Stop Killing our Rivers" (2024) called for a moratorium on intensive poultry units[7].

What we want Welsh policy makers to do:

- **Ban or tightly regulate new intensive livestock operations**
- **Extend environmental permitting to intensive dairy and beef farms**
- **Expand nature-friendly farm support for farmers**
- **Develop integrated, cross-government strategies on nitrogen and phosphorus**
- **Promote healthy soils and nutrient cycling**

Evidence/references

1. Natural Resources Wales: Principles of nutrient neutrality in relation to development or water discharge permit proposals
2. Damage from "deadly and overlooked" hidden pollutant recognised after years of political failure - inquiry findings welcomed by Sustainable Nitrogen Alliance
3. Farm incomes: April 2023 to March 2024
4. Afonydd Cymru: The Eastern And Western Cleddau
5. Statutory review of the Control of Agricultural Pollution Regulations: 2025 review
6. Sustainable Nitrogen Alliance
7. Soil Association campaign: Stop Killing our Rivers

- Agricultural pollution in rivers
- Costly nitrogen pollution can be tackled by farmers adopting organic practices, Lords told

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