# Defra reopens Sustainable Farming Incentive to limited applicants after abrupt closure



In a notable reversal, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has reopened the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme to a selection of farmers following a controversial closure that sparked intense criticism. Originally shut on 11 March 2025, the sudden halt left thousands of applicants uncertain about their financial futures, as many had invested resources into preparing their applications under the expectation of ongoing support.

Initially, Defra cited a budget that had been fully allocated, claiming that the scheme had attracted record numbers of participants. This prompt closure not only disrupted the applications of over 6,000 farmers who were in various stages of the process but also raised alarms regarding the sustainability of farming practices in the UK. Critics, including the National Farmers' Union (NFU), argued that the decision jeopardised their ability to maintain sustainable farming methods amid financial uncertainty.

Farming representatives expressed their outrage during a recent roundtable meeting with Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, Daniel Zeichner. They urged the government to reconsider its stance on the applications and called for clearer communication about the continuity of the SFI programme. Speaking to the attendees, Zeichner acknowledged a significant error in the application's closure messaging—a technical glitch had misled many farmers regarding the notice they would receive before such a shutdown. He admitted that some applicants had been shown erroneous information, leading to the confusion.

While the reopening of the SFI for about 3,000 farmers who had not fully submitted their applications was welcomed as a positive development, the NFU cautioned that the new application process would impose certain limitations, including a cap of just under £10,000 per business. NFU president Tom Bradshaw expressed disappointment with these restrictions, stating, “The government’s abrupt and wholly unacceptable decision to close the scheme was always wrong.” He added that while it is good to see an acknowledgment of flawed decision-making, many farmers remain at a disadvantage due to the constraints imposed on the reopening process.

As Defra prepares to announce a new SFI scheme this summer, uncertainty looms over its scope, budget, and the overall direction of support for farmers transitioning from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. The government's commitment to provide clarity and transparency on future funding plans is critical to rebuilding trust within the agricultural community. The challenges farmers face during this transition period underscore the significance of adequate support mechanisms, particularly as they work towards incorporating sustainable practices in their operations.

Given the complex landscape of agricultural policy in the UK post-Brexit, this episode serves as a reminder of the necessity for government departments to communicate effectively with stakeholders. Ensuring that farmers remain informed and supported is crucial to maintaining both food security and environmental integrity in the transition to new subsidy schemes.

### Reference Map

1. Defra's partial u-turn on SFI closure and eligibility for reapplication.
2. NFU's criticism of the abrupt SFI closure and demand for transparency.
3. Roundtable discussions and calls for clarity on SFI’s future.
4. Guidance on the SFI scheme and exceptions for certain applicants.
5. Details on the SFI scheme's budget and future phases.
6. Confirmation of the SFI budget cap and future reformation plans.
7. Minister's statements in debate about the SFI scheme's status and commitment.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/defra-u-turns-over-controversial-sfi-closure-following-error/704370.article> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/sfi24-closes-for-applications/> - On March 11, 2025, the National Farmers' Union (NFU) criticized the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for abruptly closing the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) 2024 scheme to new applications. The NFU expressed concerns over the lack of consultation and communication, highlighting the negative impact on farmers' confidence and the agricultural transition. They called for transparency and a fair approach to support all businesses during the transition from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy to the Environmental Land Management schemes.
3. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/farming-roundtable-on-sfi/> - Following the sudden closure of the SFI 2024 scheme, the NFU organized a roundtable with Food Security and Rural Affairs Minister Daniel Zeichner on March 17, 2025. Farming representatives urged the Minister to reopen the SFI scheme for farmers who had started applications but were unable to submit them, seek clarity on the future of the SFI, and ensure transparency in the agriculture budget. The NFU emphasized the devastating impact of the closure on farmers' livelihoods and the need for trust-building measures.
4. <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/sfi-scheme-guidance-and-information/> - The NFU provides guidance on the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) scheme, detailing the closure of new applications as of March 11, 2025, due to the budget being allocated. Existing agreements remain unaffected, and pending eligible applications will be processed. The NFU outlines exceptions for certain applicants, including those blocked due to system faults or who had requested 'assisted digital' support. They also mention the SFI Pilot farmers whose agreements have ended but haven't applied for the full SFI 2024 offer.
5. <https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/11/an-update-on-the-sustainable-farming-incentive/> - On March 11, 2025, Defra announced the closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) 2024 scheme to new applications, stating that the budget had been fully allocated. Existing SFI agreements will continue, and outstanding eligible applications will be processed. Defra committed to a 'reset' of the SFI scheme, with details of a reformed offer to be provided following the Spending Review. The blog post emphasizes the government's commitment to supporting farmers and nature recovery.
6. <https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2025/03/12/update-on-the-farming-budget/> - Defra confirmed on March 12, 2025, that the £1.05 billion cap for the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) in 2024/25 and 2025/26 had been reached, with record numbers of farmers in the scheme and 37,000 live agreements. As a result, Defra stopped accepting new SFI applications. The department plans to set out details on the next phase of the SFI scheme and address issues with the previous scheme that led to this decision.
7. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-03-12/debates/25031263000006/SustainableFarmingIncentive> - In a House of Commons debate on March 12, 2025, Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs Daniel Zeichner addressed the closure of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) 2024 scheme to new applications. He highlighted the high uptake of the scheme and the allocation of the sustainable farming budget. The Minister emphasized the government's commitment to supporting farmers and nature recovery, stating that a reformed SFI offer would be announced following the Spending Review.