

PASTURE FOR LIFE

Drought Through Farmers' Eyes

Lessons from the 2025 drought for building resilient grassland systems

2026

What 23 Pasture for Life farmers told us about the 2025 drought



Image: PfL Certified Hill Farm Real Food. Illustrative only and not representative of the farmers who took part in this research.

The spring and summer of 2025 brought unusually dry conditions across much of the UK. While rainfall figures tell part of the story, they do not explain how drought was experienced on individual farms.

To better understand these experiences, 23 Pasture for Life farmers shared how the drought affected their land, livestock, decision-making, and wellbeing.

Their farms ranged from small family holdings to large commercial enterprises, covering a wide range of soil types, landscapes, and livestock systems.

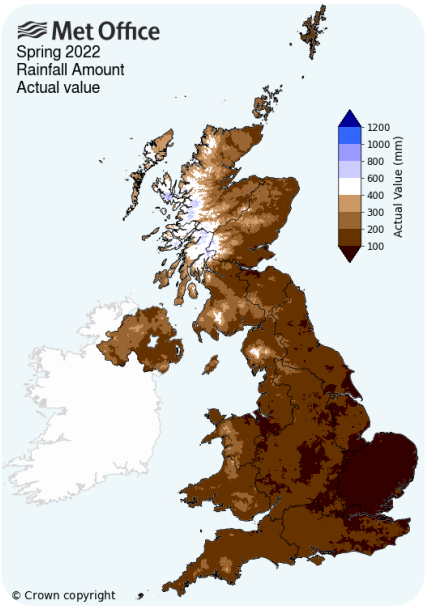
Rather than looking for a single answer to drought, this report explores the patterns, contrasts, and lessons that emerged from farmers' experiences.

Was 2025 really that dry?

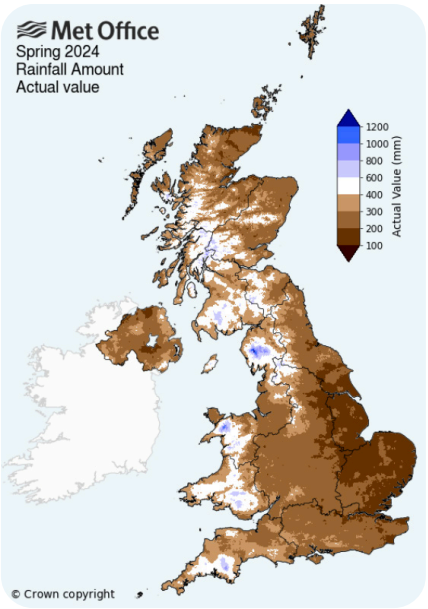
Comparison of rainfall (mm) in Spring and Summer 2022, 2024, and 2025*[1]

SPRING

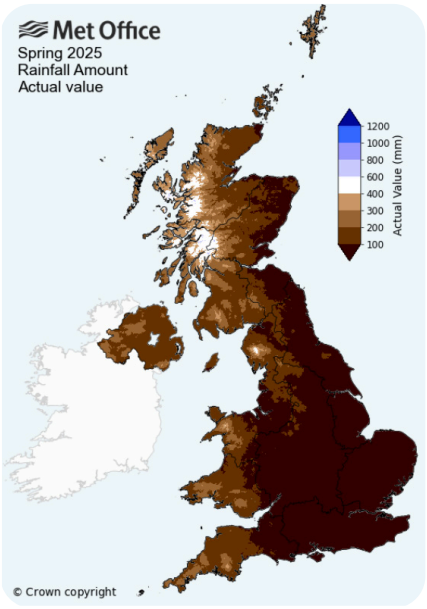
2022



2024

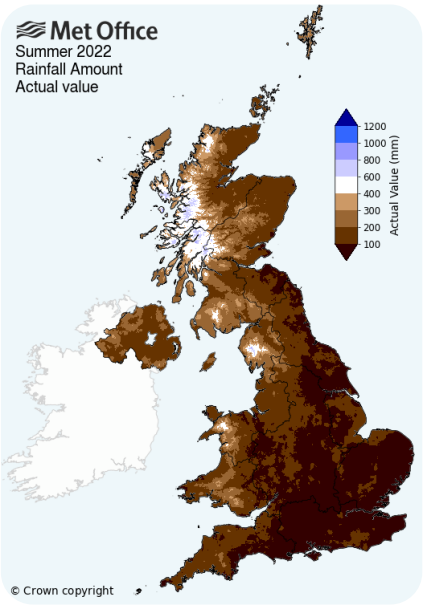


2025

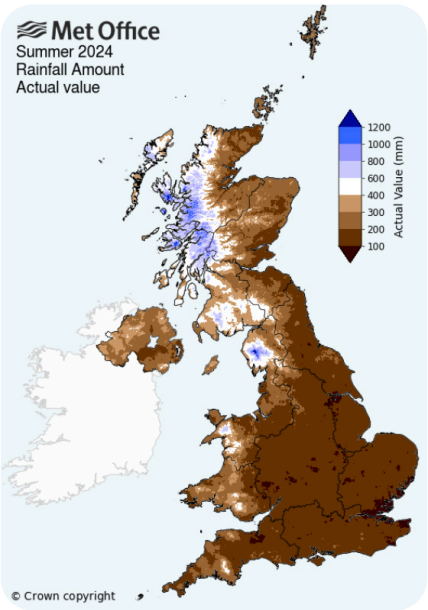


SUMMER

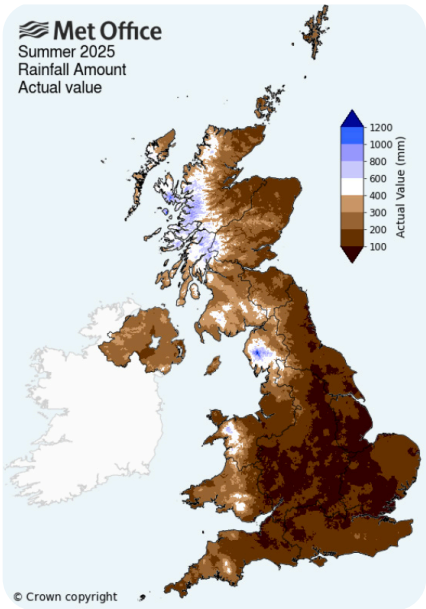
2022



2024



2025

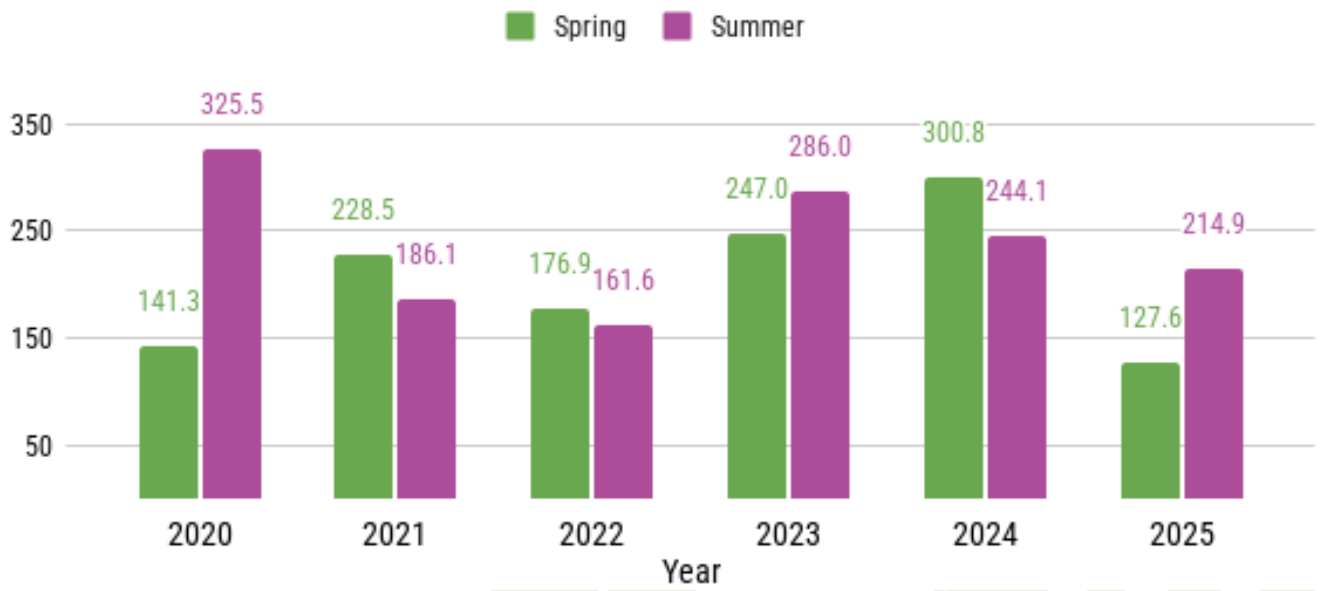


*Darker brown colour = fewer mm of rainfall recorded

Total rainfall (mm) by year and season[2]

2022 was another notably dry year and so shown above for comparison.

With spring rainfall key to grass and crop growth, spring 2025 was the UK's driest since 1974 and England's second driest since records began in 1836, behind only 1893[3].



The Farmers

23 Farmers

Farms across England and Wales

Farm size ranged from <50 acres to >2,000 acres

Number of farms by what they produce

Many farmed more than one type of livestock with most farming beef cattle, many also kept sheep, while others farmed pigs, goats, poultry, and arable crops.



Terrain and soil types

Participating farmers represented a wide range of farming systems and landscapes. Their farms covered a wide range of terrain and soil types.

- ☑ Floodplain
- ☑ Lowland
- ☑ Undulating
- ☑ Hilly
- ☑ Upland

- ☑ Sandy | Cotswold Brash | Chalk
- ☑ Silty sand | Sandy loam
- ☑ Silty loam | Loam
- ☑ Peaty
- ☑ Clay | Heavy clay

Most draining

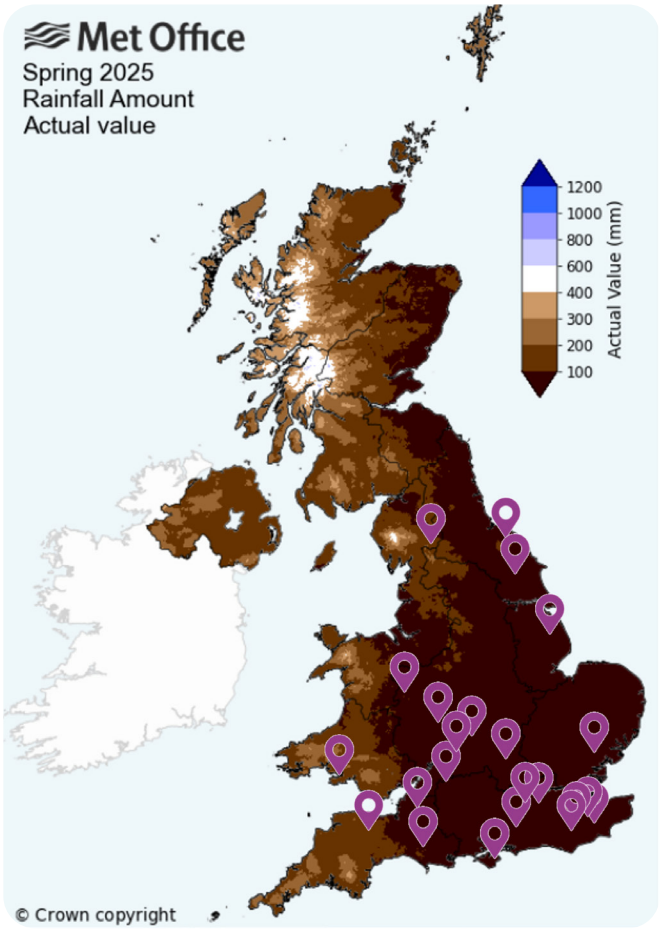
Balanced

Least draining



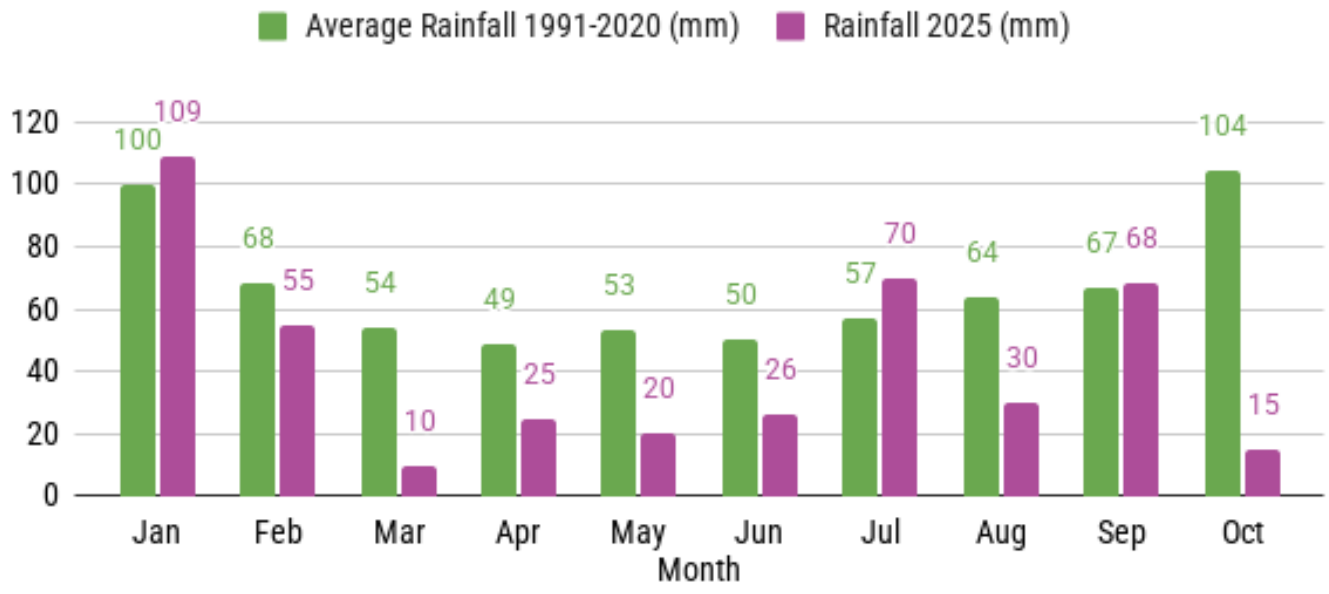
Farmers shared their experiences through 1-2-1 interviews which were transcribed, anonymised, and analysed to identify patterns, contrasts, and lessons learnt across the 23 farms.

The majority of farmers who took part were in regions most affected by drought.



Rainfall data from Farmer P01

This farmer had recorded **monthly rainfall (mm) on their farm in 2025** compared here with **average monthly rainfall data from 1991-2020 (mm)**[4] for this farm's area showing a farm specific example of much lower rainfall particularly in those spring months.



Key message

Resilience is built before drought starts

The farmers who felt most able to cope with drought rarely pointed to a single decision made during dry weather. Instead, they described decisions made years earlier.

Practically, farmers described:

- Stocking levels - running fewer animals than the grass could theoretically carry
- Rest periods - leaving some fields ungrazed for long periods
- Not using everything in a good year - leaving some grazing or forage in reserve rather than pushing the system to its limit when conditions were favourable

This gave them breathing space. When grass growth slowed, they still had options and so decisions could be made from a position of choice rather than pressure. Several farmers said the year felt 'not that hard'. Resilience was not created during the drought, but built into the system beforehand.

Equally, where grazing, water, or other infrastructure were already stretched and farmers had fewer back-up options, even good management could become exhausting. The dry weather made those existing pressures much harder to manage.

Farmer Example: P20

Following the 2022 drought, one mixed beef and sheep farmer reported their biggest lessons came from their own management. Consequently, they made deliberate changes including reduced stocking pressure, prioritised pasture recovery, and accepted leaving some ground ungrazed.

When drought returned in 2025, the weather was challenging once again but their experience was very different. Grass growth slowed but did not stop and they did not have to supplementary feed at all. When rain did arrive, fields responded quickly. The system had enough flexibility to absorb the pressure.

"2022... we were in a mess, which is basically what spurred me on to change things."

Key Lesson

Resilience developed from redesigning the system beforehand through management decisions that increased flexibility and reduced the need for pressured, last-minute decisions.



Key message 2

Observation was at the heart of good decision-making

Farmers used different ways of keeping track of conditions, but all talked about the importance of watching their grass and livestock closely.

Practically, farmers described:
- Walking fields regularly
- Watching grass recovery
- Monitoring livestock behaviour - how settled they were

Observation was skilled, continuous work to stay attentive and notice small changes.

Good decisions came from understanding what was happening on the ground.

Key Lesson

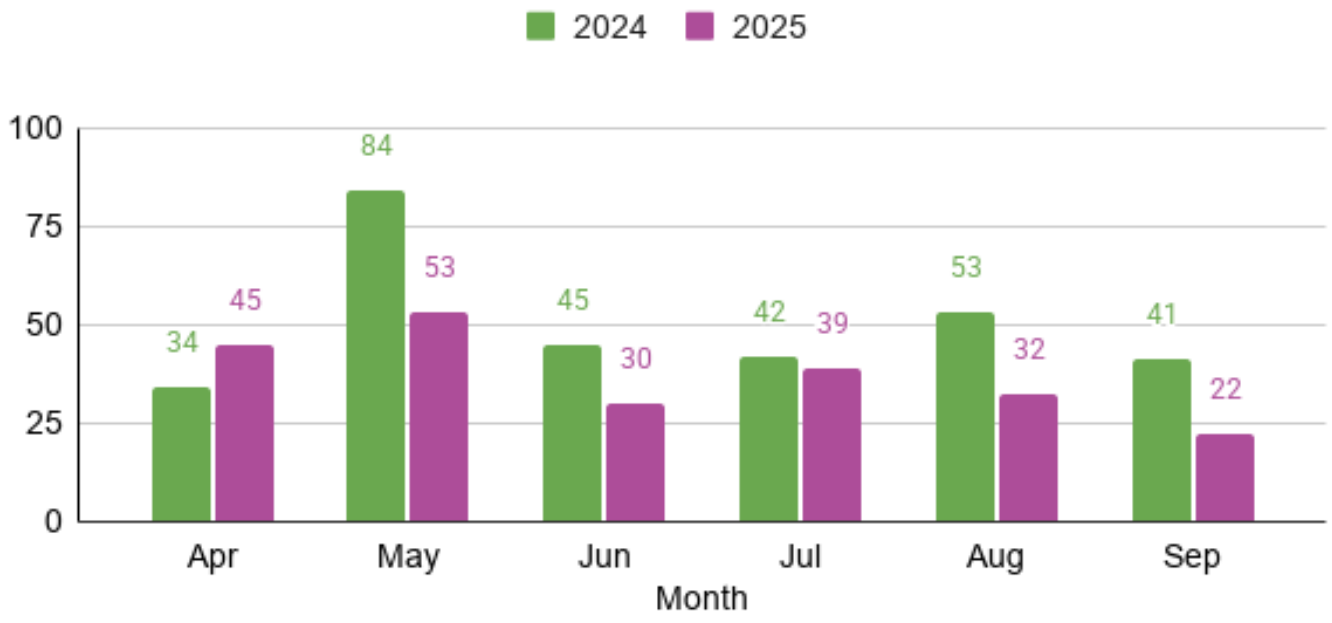
Tools can support decision-making, but observational judgement remains essential.

Farmer Example: P07

One farmer used grass measurements to support decision-making, but these never replaced observation. Walking fields, assessing grass recovery and watching livestock behaviour, then interpreting these observations alongside the data remained central throughout the drought.

Decisions were based on combining information rather than relying on any single measure.

The graph below shows this farmer's monthly grass growth (kg dry matter/ hectare). Over these 6 months, grass growth was down by 26% in 2025 compared to 2024.



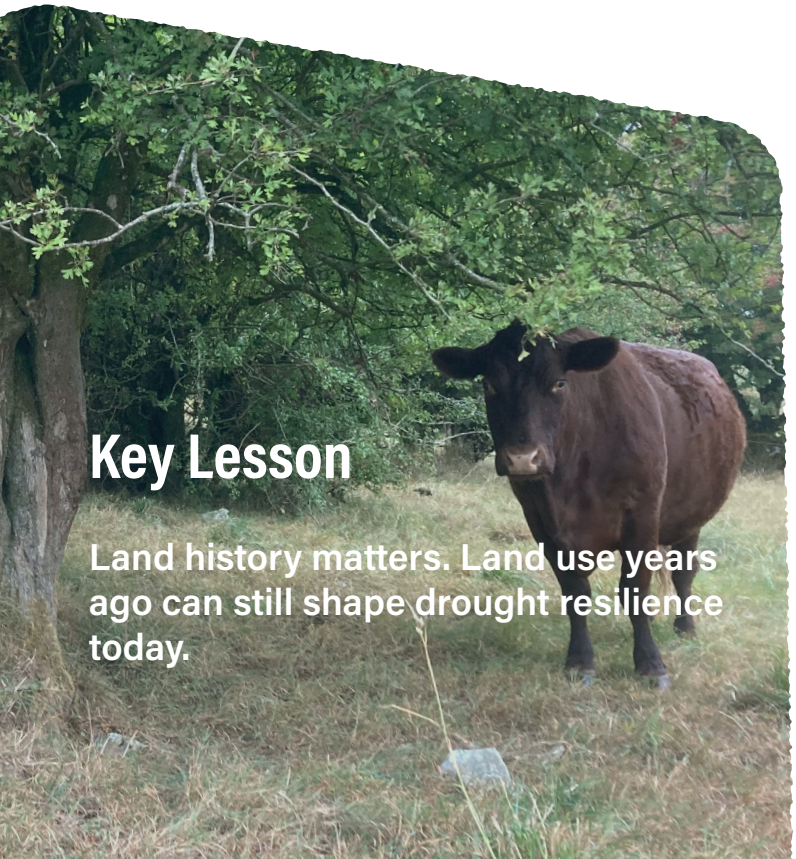
3 Key message

Every farm is different and context matters

The same drought produced very different experiences.

What shaped outcomes?:

- Soil type
- Water systems
- Infrastructure
- Previous land use
- Farm scale
- Local weather patterns



Key Lesson

Land history matters. Land use years ago can still shape drought resilience today.

Hence, comparisons can be unhelpful. What worked well in one place did not automatically work somewhere else, and that was not about effort or ability. Many farmers were very aware of this and some explicitly said they were 'lucky.'

Context shaped what options were available, which decisions were possible, and ultimately how drought was experienced on each farm.

Farmer Example: P02

This farm was undergoing conversion from former arable land to pasture and it was found that fields responded very differently during the drought.

Some areas struggled to recover after rainfall, while established grassland performed much better. This meant fields needed different levels of rest, and decisions increasingly became field-specific rather than farm-wide. Building healthy, resilient pasture was recognised as a long-term process and very much the focus of the farm's path forwards.

"The farm is still in recovery. It was farmed very hard before we moved to it. We've been building up to it and getting the infrastructure in place for seven years."

Other findings

Water

Water infrastructure created options. But farmers distinguished between water availability and water security. For many, the challenge was more about whether water could be delivered:

- At the right pressure
- To the right location
- At the right time

Storage, pipework, pumps, and boreholes often mattered as much as rainfall itself. A few farmers had invested heavily in water infrastructure after previous dry years, e.g. storage tanks or boreholes. These investments meant they had more options when water availability became tight.

"We were monitoring the water flow closely and it did get to be touch and go at one time."





Trees, woodland, and hedgerows

Trees and hedgerows increased flexibility and the range of options available.

Farmers described benefits including:

- Shelter and cooler microclimates
- Behavioural choice for livestock
- Additional browse when grass was short

However, the value of trees depended on where they were, how accessible they were to livestock, and how they fitted with the rest of the system.

Several farmers observed animals unexpectedly standing in full sun despite having access to shade. A few farmers reflected on how we interpret animal comfort. Shade availability mattered, but animal behaviour was what guided decisions.

"They have always been really picky, but this year they were just like 'Give us anything green and we'll eat it."

Mindset and mental load

Alongside the practical challenges, farmers also talked about what it was like to live with drought day after day. Much of the pressure came from continually thinking ahead and living with uncertainty. Stress did not always line up with what was happening in the field. Some farmers whose animals seemed to be coping well still described carrying a lot of worry. For many, the hardest part was not a single bad moment, it was the uncertainty: how long the drought might last, what winter might look like, and what if one more thing went wrong.

Experience did not remove stress. More experienced farmers often described less panic, but a more sustained mental load from thinking further ahead and holding more possibilities in mind. Where farmers had more options, such as spare grazing, lower stocking pressure, feed reserves, or reliable water infrastructure, they described being able to make decisions earlier rather than being forced by circumstances. Several also said that seeing their animals cope helped ease their own anxiety.

The mental challenge was often managing uncertainty rather than managing crisis.

"As much as possible I try and be self-sustained. I don't want to rely on grants and subsidies."

Support and independence

Informal support mattered more than formal support.

Main sources of reassurance and learning came from:

- Conversations with other farmers
- Local groups that understood the context
- Trusted peers
- Learning from others' experiences

"Community support here is phenomenal."

Views on formal schemes were more mixed. There was a feeling that schemes do not always align with the realities of drought, particularly when rules are rigid or do not allow for local judgement. Some farmers valued support that had enabled long-term improvements such as water infrastructure and fencing. What came through clearly was a strong desire not to become dependent on schemes.

Support was seen as something that should enable good decisions, not replace them.

Curiosity corner

Observations that made us stop and think

Many farms had trees, and hedgerows providing shade, but several farmers observed their livestock choosing to stand in full sun during the hottest part of the day. This reinforced an important message running throughout the interviews: careful observation of livestock behaviour was often more informative than assumptions about how animals should respond.

Several farmers commented on the unusually large acorn crop in 2025 and noticed their livestock eating them. None were suggesting using acorns as a feed source, as they were conscious of the risks, but their observations showed how dry conditions could change what animals made use of and how farmers viewed what was available around them.

A few farmers had previously run dairy enterprises before changing to beef cattle. Previous dairy housing sometimes provided unexpected advantages for these farmers during drought. Past decisions and past systems can continue to influence options available.

What we expected to hear more about

Some topics appeared less frequently than anticipated.



Livestock health issues like foot problems, parasites, flies, and eye conditions are a reasonable expectation. These issues were mentioned, but usually as challenges that farmers were already managing, rather than the defining feature of the drought.

We could have also heard stories centred on crisis management and emergency interventions. Instead, most farmers described making small adjustments over many weeks such as adapting grazing plans, protecting grass recovery, monitoring stock and grass more closely, and adapting gradually as conditions developed.

None of the farmers suggested there was one practice / grazing system / technology / government scheme that solved drought. Even approaches that helped were described as partial, situational, and dependent on context.

Farmers described gradual adaptation, ongoing observation, and managing uncertainty over time.

Final reflections

Each farm is unique, and yet, consistent messages came out of these interviews.

Farmers emphasised the value of watching land and livestock closely, understanding how their own farm responds to changing conditions, and being willing to adapt as circumstances change.

No farm avoided challenge altogether and no farmer claimed to have all the answers.

Farmers linked resilience to having flexibility within their systems through pasture and soil management, reviewing stocking levels, reliable water supplies, appropriate infrastructure, careful observation, and continual learning.

Across all 23 interviews, what stood out was:

- **Resilience emerged from adaptation**
- **From pasture management to water infrastructure, from observation to mindset, resilience was built into the system over time through experience, adjustment, and learning**
- **There was no single practice, technology, or scheme that solved drought**



2026: When one dry year follows another

The farmers in this report were interviewed about their experiences in 2025. But as this report was being completed, dry conditions returned.

Comparison of rainfall (mm) in Spring and July in 2025 and 2026*[1]

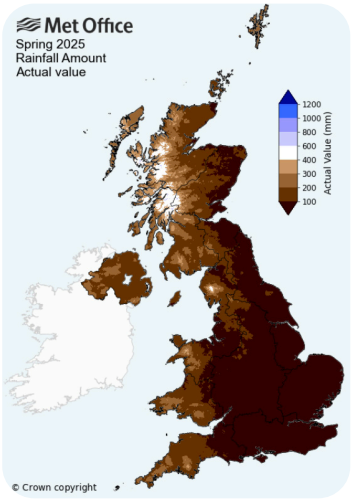
Spring 2026 was less dry across the UK as a whole than spring 2025[3]. But by July, conditions intensified and drought was declared across the whole of Wales and around half of England[5].

50%
of average spring rainfall
in Southern England[6]

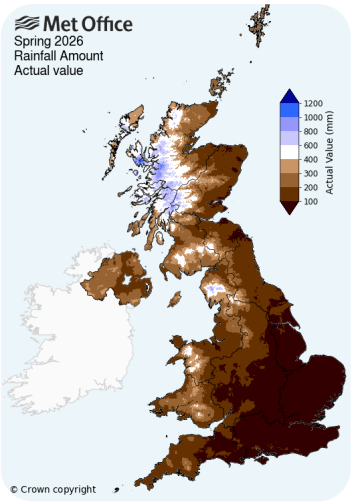
1% **of average July rainfall**
in South East England[7]

Record driest July
for England and Wales[8]

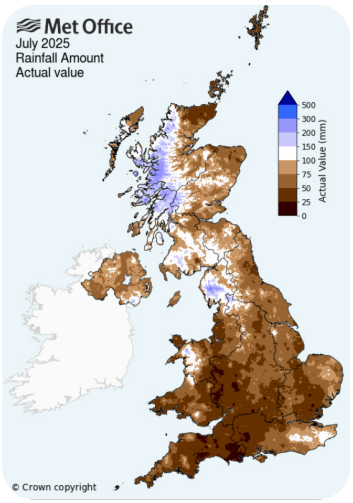
SPRING 2025



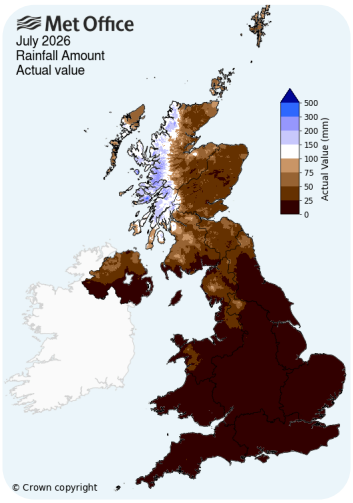
SPRING 2026



JULY 2025



JULY 2026



*Darker brown colour = fewer mm of rainfall recorded

That makes the experiences shared by farmers in 2025 particularly relevant. One difficult year can draw down grass, forage reserves, and water supplies. When another dry period follows, farms may begin from a very different starting point. The interviews cannot tell us how Farmers will experience future droughts. What they do show is the value farmers placed on having options: looking after pasture, keeping grazing or forage in reserve, reliable water infrastructure, careful observation, and being able to adapt as conditions change.

Acknowledgements and sources

This work was carried out by Dr Zoë Charnock, Research Officer at Pasture for Life.

Thank you to all the farmers who took the time to share their experiences.

Sources

1 Met Office, UK actual and anomaly maps, based on the HadUK-Grid dataset.
2 Met Office (2025) *Double record breaker: Spring 2025 is warmest and sunniest on UK record*, 2nd June 2025.
3 Met Office, National Climate Information Centre, UK rainfall series.
4 Met Office, Location-specific long-term climate averages.
5 GOV.UK: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and Environment Agency (2026) *Drought declared in half of England*, 29 July 2026.
6 Met Office (2026) *Warmest spring on record for England and Wales – third warmest for UK*, 1st June 2026.
7 GOV.UK: Environment Agency (2026) *South-east England water situation report: July 2026 summary*, updated 12 August 2026.
8 Met Office (2026) *Historic July sees record dryness, unprecedented sunshine and exceptional warmth*, 3rd August 2026.

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