



I think I'll just stretch out here...

This cow was spotted sunbathing in Glastonbury

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# Farmers praying for rain

By James Stephen

Agriculture correspondent

The continuing dry weather it is good news for holiday makers but farmers are beginning to become concerned.

Many will remember we had a similarly dry spring last year and this lead to high feed costs for livestock farmers while arable farmers generally benefited provided their yields were not too badly affected by the dry conditions.

Well it seems to be a similar story this year – the Met Office revealed that just 2.3mm of rain fell in central southern England in March which is only 4 per cent of the average rainfall for the month and April has been little better for many.

Those crops which are being grown on good to heavy soils seem to be faring reasonably well but crops which were drilled late last autumn or which are being grown on lighter soils are be-

ginning to show signs of stress and unless rain comes soon, yields are likely to be adversely affected. However, on the positive side for arable farmers, the price of most crops is holding firm.

For example, feed wheat is trading at just over £200/tonne which compares to only £99/tonne a year ago. Similarly Oilseed Rape is currently trading at £393/tonne as compared to £254/tonne a year ago.

But, such prices paint a far from positive picture for livestock farmers who look to be facing another year of high feed costs. This will be further exacerbated if the grass which is currently being mown for first cut silage

does not receive some decent rain in the next few weeks to promote growth for further cuts of silage or summer grazing.

Further, anyone who is sowing spring crops of any description will be wanting rain very soon because although the dry weather will have made the field work for sowing the crop relatively straightforward, rain will be needed soon for seeds to germinate and the young plants to survive.

So, although it has been a glorious period of generally warm, dry and sunny weather, farmers are beginning to need some rain reasonably urgently. But whether you are a farmer, gardener or just a *Mid Somerset Series* reader let's hope it comes in reasonable measure and that when the real summer months eventually come around, they are not a complete "wash out".

# Peat digging in doubt

Experts have backed moves towards gardening without peat, calling the future of one of Somerset's oldest industries into question.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) wants a Government tax on peat composts, which would add £1 to the price of the average bag, encouraging people to buy green alternatives.

An RSPB survey of influential gardeners revealed four-fifths used little or no peat in their garden and two-thirds agreed with the government's aim of phasing out peat products.

Alys Fowler, presenter on *BBC Gardeners' World* and the *Edible Garden*, argued that non-peat compost can be just as effective as peat and is a great way of recycling our waste.

Peat is still extracted from the Somerset Levels. In 2010 Somerset County Council approved plans to dig 24 hectares of peat at Cradlebridge, Sharpsham (around the size of 80 football pitches), despite opposition from residents living near the site, Sharpsham parish council and Glastonbury Town Council.

Opponents feared subsidence, damage to their properties and the surrounding land and objected to the carbon emissions caused by peat digging.



Briony Lazirides of Manor Farm, Sharpsham, whose home will be largely surrounded by water if the peat extraction at Cradlebridge goes ahead

Conservationists say extracting peat for use in gardens in the UK leads to CO2 emissions and damages natural habitats and wildlife.

Ben Malin of Terraqueous Ltd, the environmental consultancy acting as agents for the peat digging applicants, Durstons Garden Products and Eclipse Property Investments, said rigorous testing had been undertaken to establish the permeability of the site and determine boundary protection measures.

A spokesman for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said: "We recently consulted on plans to phase out peat completely, and we're now considering people's responses."

## Market Reports

**Frome, Premier Livestock Auctions, Cooper and Tanner (auctioneers) report:** Wednesday, April 20: beef cattle (170); steers (62), top price 192.5p per kilogram; heifers (55), top price 176p; barren cows and bulls (156).

Sheep (669); prime hogs (299); store/non-presented hoggets (67); suck lambs (61); couples (ewes 8, lambs 13); cull ewes/rams (206).

Dairy (41), calved heifers to £1,710, calved cows to £1,790; calves (188).

Friday, April 22: store cattle (1,108); steers to £1,152, heifers to £965.

**Sedgemoor Auction Centre, Greenslade Taylor Hunt (auctioneers) report:** Saturday, April 23: total store stock 3,911 head; dairy cattle (130), store cattle,

stirks, suckler and grazing cows (1,194); store cattle and grazing cows (785); stirks and busk calves (409); non-export calves (310); beef breeds (237); Friesians (73).

Sheep (2,051), store lambs (260); couples (471 ewes and 672 lambs); breeding ewes (45); grazing ewes (597); orphan lambs (51).

Pigs (226); store pigs (78); breeding pigs (12 plus 47); fat pigs (72); cull sows (13); boars (4).

Monday, April 25: prime cattle (85); steers (38); heifers (47); prime hogs and lambs (1,928).

Calves (23). Tuesday, April 26: total stock 1,375 head; barren cows (66); bulls (4); steers and heifers (12).

Prime hogs and lambs (1,050); lambs (757); cull ewes and rams (243).

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