

Towards a More
Sustainable Food
and Water Future
for the UK





There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.

We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in **

Archbishop Desmond Tutu



Food for Thought

Part 1

Towards a More Sustainable Food and Water Future for the UK

Report based on submissions during an eight-week consultation period, and research and analysis based on input from people in the farming and environmental sectors

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Foreword - Gina Miller



According to the UN, food and water will become the most important commodities due to population growth, climate change and global political instability. As the planet warms, world food supplies will be affected and as the Cop15 Desertification President, Alain-Richard Donwahi, has warned, the impacts of the climate crisis combine with water scarcity and poor farming practices will threaten global agriculture. Not least

because water scarcity is threatening agriculture faster than expected.

Yet in the UK, politicians have been slow to act, with our already fragile food and water sustainability even more in crisis post Brexit. This White Paper is part of the True & Fair Party's Championing the Countryside Campaign and calls for political urgency as we approach a general election, most likely in late 2024.

There is no denying that intensive agriculture is a major contributor in making the planet increasingly uninhabitable for future generations, as well as contributing to the health of our nation. Previous governments of all political hues seem oblivious to the risks, possibly because they believe it will not win votes. They believe the truth and economic effects of putting food and water security and sustainability as a priority will make them unpopular. But as our leaders they need to engage with the farming, food and water sectors to avert the crisis already affecting too many.

Whilst the present Tory government is rolling back on green initiatives and commitments, the next government must pursue an urgent agriculture policy agenda.

Leader, The True & Fair Party

Vina Killer

Introduction

The UK food supply chain represents 6.8% of gross value added (around £107 billion) and 4 million jobs with around 500,000 people in farming and fishing and over 400,000 people in food manufacturing. Yet the UK is not self-sufficient in food and imports 46% of the total food consumed, adding 20 million tonnes of C02 to the UK's carbon footprint every year.

When it comes to fresh produce, we import almost half of our vegetables and around 80% of our fruit each year. Items such as sweet peppers, lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes, berries and tropical fruits are amongst some of the most imported foods, with fresh food imports reaching around 1.98 million metric tonnes in 2021.

Our high reliance on imported food makes us more exposed to global instability, disease and the effects of climate change. Yet our domestic food and water systems remain complex, piecemeal and lack a strategic, collaborative, clear vision for agriculture, production, distribution, consumption, and waste management.

Transformative public policy has been either neglected or underfunded by successive governments for decades leading to the UK's food and water security on the verge of crisis. With the situation set to worsen due to an expected new age of pandemics, war and a rise of populism and protectionism, climate change needs to be a political priority.

Brexit has made things worse, bringing changes to food import regulations and trading relationships. Not only is it harder to import goods into the UK due to these trading frictions, but the cost has risen by around 6%, according to the London School of Economics. Brexit has also limited UK farmers' access to labour, with research in the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee - Labour Shortages in the Food and Farming sector, Fourth Report of Session 2021–22 suggesting that there are in excess of 500,000 vacancies from a workforce of 4.1 million¹. There is also the issue of lack of funding post Brexit².

Trade deals that have been negotiated do not protect our domestic farmers or food producers, and divergence from water, sewage and environmental standards will worsen our already fragile waterways.

¹ https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/9580/documents/162177/default/

 $^{^2\,}https://www.agrirs.co.uk/blog/2022/09/main-challenges-facing-the-uk-agricultural-sector?source=google.com/linearity/linea$





Helen Wetherall

True & Fair Parliamentary Candidate for Derbyshire Dales - a rural constituency

Farming and husbandry of the land, and the future of our environment are too important and fundamental to be used as a political football. The fact that successive

governments are making short-term decisions which they think are vote-winners rather than positioning us safely and securely for the future is alarming.

Speaking to my local farmers, they have been let down by the Brexit deal, with the threat of cheap, lesser quality imports now hanging over them. They are resilient, hardworking, and adaptable but they need the right support and legal framework around them to give them a fighting chance. Yet there appears to be no leadership or vision from central government and existing schemes favour big landowners rather than the smaller, family farmers. From an environmental perspective, we need more local food for local people, reducing cardon emissions, travel times and costs and increasing efficiency and the quality of produce sold.

Recent rollbacks on plans to protect the environment and reduce our carbon footprint are further examples of how short-termism risks our long-term future prosperity. Clear, honest, transparent, ambitious policies designed to lift food standards, increase our water security, improve the health of the population need to replace the 'race to the bottom' approach we currently have. And key to this is listening to the people that know - the farmers, rural communities, and their representatives.

Technology and Innovation's Role

There appears to be a quiet revolution happening in the UK food production sector that is largely being supported by private investment but needs more political support.

Called the fourth agricultural revolution, initiatives include vertical farming and underground farming. Whilst there are pros and cons in this nascent sector, we need to debate these initiatives as we seek to feed our growing population with high quality, affordable, environmentally friendly foods.

Vertical Farming

Vertical farming offers a unique alternative to traditional farming approaches, independent of seasonal and other market-led forces. The global vertical farming market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 10.3% by 2028.

Vertical farming is the process of growing crops and food produce in stacked vertical layers in a controlled environment. Usually, this means crops are grown on a horizontal surface, but there are multiple layers. However, depending on the crop type, some vertical farming systems grow plants directly onto a vertical or almost vertical surface.

All controlled environment farming, not just vertical farming but glasshouses as well, is being advocated as the modern way to develop food production, not just for security of food but also for environmental benefits.



Benefits of Vertical Farming

- Vertical farming has gained significant attention in recent years as a potential solution to some of the challenges facing traditional agriculture. As well as being sustainable and requiring fewer resources less land, water, and labour this method also allows the capacity to grow crops all year round.
- Year-round production and controlled conditions make vertical farming efficient and effective. They're not susceptible to the impacts of storms, droughts, or extreme weather events in the way conventional farms are exposed.
- Less energy consumption fully automated indoor farming systems are powered by the sun rather than LED lighting; crops are not reliant on fossil fuels or other less ideal energy sources.
- Reduced carbon footprint indoor farming brings food production closer to the consumer, reducing the mileage travelled.
- Less water waste farmers can use 98% less water and 99% less land. They can produce crop yields of 240 times that of traditional farms through year-round rolling or perpetual harvest.
- Fewer use of pesticides vertical farms reduce the need for pesticides and herbicides, as the controlled environments used in vertical farms help to prevent pest infestations and disease outbreaks. Because the plants are grown inside, there's no danger of fertiliser run-off polluting nearby rivers either.

Negatives of Controlled Environment Farming

In June 2022, a vast new vertical farm opened on the outskirts of Bedford by a company called Infarm. But now the future of the Bedford farm looks bleak. On November 2022, Infarm emailed its workforce to announce they were laying off "around 500 employees" - more than half of the workforce citing a need to reduce operating costs.

The reason was that several pressures that have always existed for vertical farms come to a head in 2022. As an industry, they are extremely vulnerable to increases in electricity prices. Powering all of the plant-growing LEDs uses a lot of electricity, and between December 2020 and July 2022 consumer energy prices in the EU went up by 58 percent which meant that rather than spending around 25 percent of their operational costs on electricity, it went up to around 40 percent.

At the same time, private investors were starting to tighten their belts and looking for faster routes to profitability. Vertical farms are expensive to build compared with conventional outdoor farms and take longer. In the USA, AppHarvest - a firm that builds high-tech greenhouses - has struggled to find enough cash to fund its ongoing operations despite going public in 2021.

Another downside is that most vertical farms grow herbs, shoots, and other leafy salad vegetables. Leafy greens are the industry's go-to produce because they grow quickly under LEDs and have a short shelf life and premium price point. But the poor global financial outlook is putting pressure on consumers via the cost of living crisis. With inflation set to remain relatively high, consumers are forgoing expensive vertically farmed herbs and salad produce.

These technology initiatives have not transformed agriculture in the way that its early proponents promised. As we move to much more of our electricity generated by renewables, this may change but it's not the world we live in right now.

Vertical farming is a promising part of achieving sustainable agriculture that offers numerous benefits over traditional farming methods. While there are challenges associated with this approach, the potential benefits make vertical farming an attractive option for the future of agriculture.

As technology continues to improve and costs decrease, it is likely that vertical farming will play an increasingly important role in feeding the world's growing population.

Recommendation

• One interesting recommendation is controlled farming should 'pair' with traditional agriculture to rapidly grow young plants or grow a lot of plants for use in research. Also, the huge amount of data collected can help all food production. A very interesting space to keep a close eye on.



Several vertical farming operations have been established in the UK, providing valuable insights into the benefits and challenges associated with this approach. Here are a few examples:

- **Growing Underground:** located in Clapham, South London, Growing Underground is a hydroponic farm that uses abandoned World War II tunnels to grow microgreens and salad greens. The farm uses a closed-loop system that recycles water and nutrients, reducing water usage by up to 70%. Crops are also grown without pesticides or herbicides, providing a high-quality, sustainable fresh produce. The University of Cambridge is exploring the vertical farming of seafood by collaborating with Growing Underground's farm 33 metres below Clapham High Street.
- Intelligent Growth Solutions: based in Edinburgh, Intelligent Growth Solutions (IGS) is a technology company that has developed a vertical farming system that uses patented energy-efficient LED lighting and a unique modular design. The system grows a wide range of crops, including herbs, fruits, and vegetables. IGS's vertical farming technology is also captures a huge amount of data on crop growth and environmental conditions, enabling farmers to optimise their growing operations and maximise yields.
- Vertical Future: located in West London, Vertical Future is a vertical farming company
 that uses a combination of hydroponics, aeroponics, and artificial intelligence to grow a
 range of crops, including lettuce, kale, and microgreens. The company's vertical farming
 systems are housed in shipping containers, making them highly portable and flexible.
 Vertical Future also uses a closed-loop system that recycles water and nutrients, reducing
 water usage by up to 90%.
- Jones Food Company: based in Lincolnshire, the Jones Food Company operates one of Europe's largest vertical farms, covering an area of 5,000 square meters. They are now building a 'skyscraper farm' in Gloucester which is said to be the largest in the world equivalent to 96 tennis courts stacked on top of each other. The farm grows a range of crops, including herbs, leafy greens, and strawberries, using hydroponic systems and LED lighting. The farm's crops are grown without pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides, and are harvested year-round, providing a reliable source of fresh produce. These farms use 94 percent less water than normal production methods, and can be managed using 100 percent green energy. Because the plants are grown inside, there's no danger of fertiliser run-off polluting nearby rivers either.
- Smartkas, the Dutch agricultural technology firm is behind a vertical farming project in an industrial park in Essex. The company is able to do this by growing the plants hydroponically, in water. The closed conditions mean it uses no pesticides, and the warehouse even has its own bee colony for pollination.

Regenerative Farming

Across the globe people in the agricultural sectors are looking to regenerative farming as a pathway to aid environmental sustainability through agricultural practices that focuses on preserving and restoring the environment while enhancing the long-term health of the soil.

This is an important piece of the puzzle in the developing a vital strategy to protect the environment and is crucial for sustainable agriculture and the well-being of our country, people and planet.

Conventional agricultural practices have led to several environmental issues:

- Soil Degradation: Continuous use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides depletes the soil's natural fertility.
- Water Pollution: Runoff from agrochemicals contaminates water bodies, harming aquatic ecosystems and human health.
- Loss of Biodiversity: Monoculture farming reduces the variety of plants and insects, affecting the ecosystem.
- **Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** Large-scale farming contributes to carbon emissions, exacerbating climate change.

True & Fair support several of the recommendations in a report from cross-party think tank Demos called 'Sowing Resilience' calling for the Government to improve policies and frameworks to boost regenerative agricultural practices. Regenerative farming practices would help nature restoration, improve food security, and boost profits for British farmers.

Sir Robert Goodwill, Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee and former Defra minister, wrote the report's foreword, stating: "As farmers adapt to the post-Brexit agricultural support system, feel the increasing effects of climate change and face evermore volatile international supply chains, we must accelerate the adoption of regenerative farming'.



Regenerative farming employs techniques that aim to mitigate these issues with recommendations which include:



No-Till Farming: Reduces soil disturbance, preventing erosion and carbon loss.



Crop Rotation and Diversification: Enhances soil health and prevents pests and diseases.



Cover Cropping: Preserves soil moisture and improves organic matter.



Livestock Integration: Combining crops and animals mimics natural ecosystems and enriches the soil.

The data supports the claim that regenerative farming has a positive impact on the environment. Studies show increased organic matter and beneficial microorganisms in regenerative systems do improve soil health, and reducing chemical use leads to cleaner waterways and improves water quality. In terms of biodiversity, regenerative diverse farming practices hugely support pollinators and wildlife.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence, conversations and input from experts, True & Fair believe the government should include the following policy recommendations for the adoption and support of regenerative farming:

- Defra to significantly increase the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) 'management payments' to include an option for additional sums to cover investment costs as farmers switch to new farming practices and be guaranteed for seven years to enable those practicing regenerative farming to restore profits without relying on government payments.
- As proposed by Demos, establish a "Regenerative Farming Task Force" and peer-to-peer
 "Regenerative Farming Learning Groups". But unlike the Demos recommendation, we do not
 believe this should be undertaken by Defra but the proposed Independent National Food Strategy
 board. This would bring together representatives of farming, consumers, rural communities,
 environmentalists and government departments to help evaluate and deliver policy-guided
 solutions.



Recommendations

- The country needs a clear policy for the use and protection of arable land, and such a policy should include increased development and maintenance of farming skills. (A survey by Demos that accommodated their report, found that 70% of farmers surveyed were not familiar with regenerative farming practices).
- Policies need to include incentivising farmers and land managers to contribute to the net-zero commitment through tree planting methods, rather than focusing on carbon capture technologies. Another think tank, the Green Alliance states that such policies could save British taxpayers £100bn by 2050.
- Incentivise farmers and landowners to transform unproductive farmland into carbon sink holes, with a target of 10% of the "least productive farmland" in the UK being managed for nature restoration projects such as wetlands, woodlands, and extensively grazed grasslands by 2030. This would then rise to 33% by 2050, when the net-zero commitment will need to be met. This aligns with a key recommendation in the Chris Skidmore's Net-Zero Review is for Government to outline a land-use framework aligned to the net-zero target.
- Launch a consumer awareness campaign encouraging retailers and consumers to choose products from regenerative farms, thereby growing and supporting this sector via market demand.
- More industry collaboration thereby fosters partnerships between agricultural stakeholders to advance regenerative farming at scale.

By having a proactive committed strategy to adopt and support regenerative farming practices, we can work toward a sustainable and environmentally friendly future for UK agriculture.

Water Crisis

Governments around the world signed a treaty pledging to combat desertification in 1992, alongside the UN framework convention on climate change, which is the parent treaty to the 2015 Paris climate agreement, and the UN convention on biodiversity, which aims to safeguard species abundance. But the desertification treaty gains least attention, and last year's Cop15 on desertification went

The effects of droughts on food security, on migration and economies will all lead to accelerated negative effects warns Alain-Richard Donwahi, president of the UN's desertification conference. The UK, like the rest of the world, is likely to face major disruption to food supplies well before temperatures rise by the 1.5C target, as the impacts of the climate crisis, combined with water scarcity and poor farming practices, threaten agriculture.

largely unnoticed compared with the climate Cop27 and the biodiversity Cop15 last December.

The next desertification conference will be held in Riyadh in December 2024, and the UK has an important role to play. As Mr Donwahi, says "We need to solve all the problems together. Desertification and drought leads to climate change, leads to loss of biodiversity. And when you have climate change you have droughts, floods, storms. It's not only the poor countries, everybody is in the same boat [on food security]. Climate change, droughts, storms, floods don't know any boundaries, they don't need a visa to go into a country."

Analysis by Kingfisher in May 2023 revealed that seven out 17 regions in England are set to experience severe water stress by 2030. By 2040, the year the Environment Agency has warned that England risks running short of water, the number of seriously water stressed regions is on course to rise to 12, out of a total of 17.

Brexit Divergence set to make our water crisis, catastrophic

As members of the EU, the UK operated under the Water Framework Directive (WFD), which meant a national chemical and ecological survey of rivers was conducted annually. After Brexit, this annual requirement was removed, and it is believed that this is already leading to more pollution in rivers and waterways. Recent analysis by the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) found that 36 toxic chemicals and pesticides banned in the bloc since Brexit are not outlawed for use in the UK.

Figures released by the Environment Agency in 2020 showed for the first time that no river achieved good chemical status, suggesting pollution from sewage discharge, chemicals and agriculture are having a huge impact on river quality.

In 2016, 97% of rivers were judged to have good chemical status, though the standard of tests used this time was tougher.

Back in 2019, the last time the full water assessments took place, just 14% of rivers in England and Wales were in good ecological health and none met standards for good chemical health.

The government has said it does not intend to deliver a complete update until 2025.

Ministers are also attempting to rip up EU-derived sewage pollution rules for housebuilders with a Bill that would allow planning officials to ignore the extra pollution caused by sewage from new homes in sensitive areas and runoff from construction sites.

Against a very complex backdrop and a fundamental problem in that the UK has a one pipe Victorian system for both sewage and rainwater, so at periods of heavy rain fall, problems increase, we have to do more. The lack of private and public investment to update the infrastructure has been neglected for decades, adding to the toxic results we have been recently experiencing.

In March 2023 Ofwat were given new powers to block companies from shareholder payouts if they fail to hit performance and environmental targets. But we do not believe this goes far enough.

Rivers

Dried-up rivers are becoming an increasingly common sight in England, with the country endured its hottest June on record. Changing climate patterns are a significant contributor but a key culprit is an over-reliance on abstraction where companies take water from rivers and natural underground reservoirs and a neglected water and sewage network, some of which hasn't been upgraded in decades. This includes water pipes that leak a fifth of the water they carry, a failure to build new reservoirs, and the polluting of waterways with unknown quantities of raw sewage.

In the wetter north, most of the water supply is sucked out of rivers, lakes and reservoirs - some of which are dammed rivers. According to Timothy Foster, senior lecturer in water-food security at the University of Manchester we need the manage abstraction and invest in the supply infrastructure. We haven't done anywhere near enough of either."

As a result, a dryer than usual summer can quickly have serious consequences. "London has just three and a half weeks of water storage," Cathryn Ross, interim chief executive of Thames Water, told a public meeting of environmentalists in April 2023. "It's a bit crazy for a global city," she said. "We were running into some serious issues with water supplies last year." "There's a lot to be done."



Recommendation

 Water companies to be legally reformed as 'social purpose' companies that would stay in private hands but give greater weight to the needs of customers, staff and the environment.

People Are Part of the Fix

In England and Wales we use proportionally more water than in many European countries. The government has a target for water companies to reduce per capita usage to 110 litres a day by 2050, to tackle water shortages. The south-east and east of England in particular face the biggest water shortages in the coming years, as droughts caused by climate breakdown and population growth stretch our already lessening supplies. Without further action, the National Infrastructure Commission says there is a one in four chance over the next 30 years that large numbers of households will have their water supply cut off for an extended period because of severe drought.

As well as fixing the regulators, water companies, food production and water usage of IT companies and business in general, politicians have to help the public do more to save water. Promises to bring in minimum standards for all water using products by 2035 and impose new building regulations to ensure homes are water efficient by 2060 is too little, too late. We are certain politicians do not want to be in the position of having to ban bath plugs, and restricting water for prolonged period of time, so they need to act now.

Recommendations

- Launch an education and awareness programme about water usage.
- Mandate water companies to cut leaks by 50% by 2030.
- · Install smart water meters to encourage customers to reduce water use.
- Introduce water labelling on products such as showers, baths, kettles by 2025 and introduce new
 regulations for housebuilding to enforce water efficiency measures, to meet water reduction targets
 and save customers money by 2030.

Freshwater Strategy

Whilst there is much more publicity and increased awareness about the pollution happening to our rivers, beaches and major waterways, there is still not enough awareness or strategies to address our smaller freshwater bodies. We are therefore focusing this section of the Paper on the submission below from Professor Jeremy Biggs, CEO of The Freshwater Habitats Trust charity as an important area to address in our national water crisis strategy.

Our management of water needs a root-and-branch reform. Billions of pounds have been spent in the UK over the last 20 years trying to protect freshwaters but the majority of rivers and lakes are still polluted. Our vulnerable freshwater plants and animals are disappearing from the countryside. The myriad small waterbodies like ponds, small streams and fens that we can restore and create to help solve the biodiversity crisis are ignored by policy makers.

There are some simple and urgent steps we need to take.

Recommendations for a national programme to protect rivers, ponds, lakes and wetlands for wildlife and people.

First, we need to recognise that what we're doing now isn't working. We need a National Summit on Water to re-direct the juggernaut of current policies so they are based on what modern evidence shows will make a difference.

Then we need to work across the whole of the water environment, not just focussing on big polluted rivers or large lakes but on the networks of water meadows, springs, ponds, fens and headwaters, which together create habitats for wildlife and bring water and nature close to people.

Creating sustainable long-lasting change requires a focus on four principles:

- **Protect the best and build out.** Britain still has some amazing rivers, ponds, lakes and wetlands. But their wildlife is becoming isolated and under threat from climate change. It is essential to stop this loss in our best sites. Particularly because the rare animals and plants found here are the sources for recovery across the rest of the landscape.
- Start with the smallest. Most of the freshwater environment is made up of a vast array of little waterbodies like streams and ponds. They have been overlooked as individually unimportant. We now know that, collectively, they are hugely important. They are small, so easy habitats to improve and create. They are a remarkable resource that we can use to bring rapid benefits at a time when change is urgent.

- Treat freshwaters as a network. We often think of rivers or lakes or ponds separately, but waterbodies and wetlands form an interdependent network. By managing them as a network, creating links and corridors for wetland wildlife, we will gain far more.
- Bring back clean water to town and country. One of the biggest impacts on freshwater is pollution. We need to bring clean water back to the landscape to create a healthier environment for everyone.

Creating a Freshwater Network

Freshwaters in our modern landscapes are fragmented by human activity like intensive agriculture and development and threatened by climate change. Landscape-scale change is needed to reverse losses and enable wildlife to move and adapt. We need a resilient Freshwater Network that connects our best freshwater sites and helps wildlife cope with change.

To achieve this, we need to:

Identify and protect best

There is a saying 'what gets measured gets managed'. We urgently need a National Asset Register of Important Freshwater Areas that identifies the core areas to protect and build out from. Together with this we need a targeted monitoring programme for these areas to ensure we identify declining species and habitats and prevent extinctions before they occur.

Build out and link

We need to buffer and extend our best freshwater sites and forge connections between isolated reserves. There are many ways we can do this but the most effective will be:

- A national restoration programme for our Historic Floodplains that can capitalise on these natural corridors.
- Make ponds like a beaver: ponds are tiny but pack a huge punch for wildlife. Creating many more
 can quickly, cheaply and effectively provide new habitat and stepping-stones.
- Restore and re-establish freshwater and wetland habitats: we must restore and recreate freshwaters and wetlands where they bring the greatest benefits for wildlife, for carbon capture and for wellbeing.

Create an abundance of clean water

We cannot have a vibrant, ecologically functioning Freshwater Network if waterbodies are full of pollution. In the Freshwater Network we need to ensure that there is an abundance of clean water.



Here, we can make new clean water ponds, buffer streams and rivers, stop sewage pollution and manage the land to encourage more natural and less polluting land uses.

Deliver

There are already policy mechanisms for delivering the network. But they need to be better focused and funded to be cohesive - not the current scatter-gun approach. We must use policy and financial incentives that drive resources into critical areas including:

- Financial incentives: target / focus
 - (i) government agri-environment funds provided to landowners
 - (ii) private sector funding e.g. Biodiversity Net Gain to achieve the principles of the Freshwater Network
- Create clean water protection zones: de-intensifying the land around critical freshwater habitats is the best way of protecting them.
- Build freshwaters into complementary schemes e.g. ensure all woodland creation programmes also include clean water and wetland creation.
- Mandate actions to protect freshwaters as part of Local Nature Recovery Strategies in England and their equivalents in the rest of the UK.

Politicians need to develop a bold restoration agenda to create a living Freshwater Network that will make our landscapes wilder, wetter, cleaner and connected.

Conclusion



The present government are backtracking on the green agenda and trashing commitments to safeguard our environment.

The next government must acknowledge that we are approaching crisis point and detail a policy agenda that shows leadership and competent stewardship of our natural resources, and food and water, and not leave future generations to carry a devastating burden.





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