

Squeezed Middle Debate video transcript

Professor Iain Gordon, James Hutton Institute: The debate today is around an issue about the squeezed middle, the squeezed middle is that land which is between the productive agricultural land in the east coast of Scotland and the hills and mountains which are important for biodiversity and conservation. That squeezed middle does a whole bunch of things for us at the moment, it provides us with fresh, clean water; obviously livestock such as beef and sheep production, there's sporting estates, there's forestry, all sorts of different things are happening on that land.

In the future though there's likely to be changes in those pressures and what we're keen to do is bring the science that we do at the Institute to ask the question 'how should we use that land most effectively in the future?'. We have brought a whole bunch of people from around Scotland into the debate today and I'm very much looking forward to a constructive conversation that takes the issue forward based on the evidence that we have at the James Hutton Institute.

Professor Bill Slee, James Hutton Institute: Well, the squeezed middle is important land; it's productive land – it's not the most productive farm land but it also is subject to a lot of other demands. We do have a set of policies – we've got the Common Agricultural Policy which is being reformed; we've got the Rural Development Programme. If we can tweak some of the measures to better match the public goods that are delivered by the squeezed middle and also reduce some of the problems that are there, like water pollution and so on, then I think there are options within the policy mix and we could refine and improve them.

Professor Des Thompson, Scottish Natural Heritage: I was actually brought up in the squeezed middle, up in the north of Scotland and just reflecting on the many changes we have seen – the primary school closing down, incredible changes in wildlife – losses of birds like lapwings, kestrels, curlew and for Scottish Natural Heritage, what we are trying to do is to arrest these changes, really bring about improvements and gains – get biodiversity, get wildlife back. And part of that is about having much more joined up working between the different organisations – between government agencies, non-government organisations and business sector all working together to try and improve the standing of the landscape and the future of nature.

Scott Walker, NFU Scotland: Farming very much feels itself part of the squeezed middle; it's the land that farming's involved in which is now having strong competition whether that be from forestry or alternative land uses. But the advantage that farming has compared to these other factors that wish to dominate is that farmers are used to working in cooperation, farmers are used to working in partnership with forestry. Farming created the landscape and has created the environment in which the other people benefit from so I think as long as farmers' voices are listened to and farmers are taken into account we can work very well with the others who wish to use the squeezed middle land.

Simon Thorp, Scotland's Moorland Forum: The key thing that we see in the squeezed middle is it is so flexible. It is one bit of land in Scotland where it can manage a variety of land uses but it is also important to see how that links to the moorland areas and also to the low ground

where, perhaps, these uses are less flexible. So, the importance is one of collaborative working – we need to be brave about addressing the issues, we need to embrace novel issues as well as the traditional land uses and above all I think we need to look at the people who manage these areas; land owners are important, we need to consider their needs, their interests and make sure we are giving them enough opportunities to manage the land in the best possible way.

Jo Ellis, Woodland Expansion Advisory Group: It's not an easy answer; there's no single answer for the squeezed middle. I think we need all the mechanisms that help us do land use in Scotland to work together so the grant scheme in particular which underpins a lot of this – that needs to stop squeezing and start helping everybody to collaborate and work in partnership. I think we need forums for discussion like the one we have today where people go beyond entrenched positions and work out how they can do land use in a way that benefits Scotland working together but it's not easy.

John Morrison, Squeezed Middle Debate chairperson: This was the first James Hutton Debate and it was absolutely fantastic, the aim was to get a conversation about the squeezed middle – now I didn't know what the squeezed middle was but I do now and what I've realised is that the squeezed middle, this bit of middle land in Scotland is really important to all of us and I think this is what the James Hutton Institute manages to do – it takes issues that are very complex, that involves a lot of science, a lot of economics but it brings it down, breaks it up and makes it important to all of us and it's important that the whole of Scotland actually understands about the squeezed middle and, equally important, to get the right answer.