Sustainable Food Trust Policy Briefing
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The Agriculture Bill: Our ambition for the future of food, farming and the environment

The Sustainable Food Trust (SFT) welcome the UK Government's introduction of the revised Agriculture Bill to Parliament. We are pleased to see that the new Bill builds on the conversations that have been happening over recent years and acknowledges the importance of soil health, genetic diversity and agroecology. We strongly support the adoption of a whole-farm approach to farm policy, which integrates efficient and sustainable food production with practices that maintain and enhance natural, social and human capital and are keen for this approach to be at the heart of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs). We support the Government's objective to design a new agriculture support system that corrects the economic distortions that currently exist within food and farming and reintegrate food systems in harmony with the natural environment. Such an approach could have multiple benefits, including climate change mitigation, improvements in biodiversity and encouraging better diets and public health outcomes.

To achieve the systemic shift towards more sustainable farming methods, we need to unlock the barriers to change since the current business model means that most farmers have no option but to employ agricultural practices that do not serve the public interest in terms of its impacts on environment and public health. Through the introduction of this revised Agriculture Bill, the UK Government has the opportunity to create the economic conditions where farmers are financially supported for adopting sustainable practices, which can then emerge as the most profitable and economically viable way of producing food.

The addition of soil health into the revised Agriculture Bill is critical to reversing the damage to UK soils. Soil has lost a vast amount of carbon to the atmosphere, but has the potential regain this under appropriate management. It also contains 25% of global biodiversity and supports an intricate ecosystem of microorganisms, invertebrates, insects and small mammals. Yet industrial farming has been a mining operation, plundering organic matter, damaging soil structure and destroying soil biodiversity. As our report on *The Hidden Cost of UK Food* shows, soil degradation in the UK costs £3.21 billion annually and an estimated $6.3 to $10.6 trillion at a global level. The UK Government needs to encourage farmers who are building soil and use ELMs to support actions (for example crop rotations, composts or manures, sustainable grazing and low-input systems) that have the capacity to improve soil health.

Suggestions for amendments to the Agriculture Bill

We thoroughly applaud the acknowledgment of "agroecology" within this Bill. Including the term within the legislation is a ground-breaking step to recognising the importance of shifting food and farming to more sustainable methods of production that support a healthy ecosystem. That said, without adequately supporting the implementation of agroecology, it is merely rhetoric. Therefore, the SFT is calling for an

amendment that would provide specific funding for farmers who want to switch from conventional production to agroecological production. Such funding should only be available at a whole-farm level, since a piecemeal approach of greening only the edges of fields would create isolated areas of biodiversity on farms that remained deserts of intensive agriculture. Creating a funding mechanism to enable farmers who are currently locked into an industrialised production system to adopt an agroecological approach would speed the much-needed transition towards more sustainable farming methods.

The SFT also feels that the Agriculture Bill be amended to ensure that in any future trade deals, imports of agricultural products meet UK environmental and animal welfare standards. The goal of this amendment is to protect UK consumers from lower quality imports and to allow UK agriculture to remain competitive, rather than seeing UK farmers be unable to compete with cheaper imports putting the viability of many farm businesses under threat.

The Value of Area-Based Payments for the Environmental Land Management Scheme

One of the key provisions within the original and the revised Bill is the phasing out Pillar I area-based payments. We recognise the logic associated with this proposal on the basis that eligibility for such support under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) requires little more than adherence to minimum environmental standards which (quite understandably) push most farmers towards industrialised agriculture that does not operate within the best interests of the environment and public health.

However, one of our core concerns is that by taking this action, the 'baby' of area-based payments will be thrown out with the 'bath water' of the social security element of CAP. Instead, we believe that many of the desired changes to farming practice would be most effectively delivered through a whole farm support package, much of which should be based on land area. To achieve the systemic shift that is needed, we advocate using the proposed ELMs to challenge the current business model. Such a scheme could include a number of options - some applicable on a field scale, some on a whole farm scale, and some of a more tailored stewardship nature, which together would ensure a systemic, rather than piecemeal, adoption of more sustainable farming practices.

It is critical that the entirety of the farm be managed in a sustainable manner if farmers are to receive payments. If farmers enter only part of their farm into ELMs while continuing to manage large areas of farmland in a business as usual, highly intensive way, they should not be eligible for payments. Such an approach would not achieve the systemic shift in farming that is needed to reverse the catastrophic declines in wildlife, soil and water quality, and other aspects of natural capital. Producing high quality, health-promoting food from production systems that avoid damage to the environment while maintaining and building natural capital, should be the prime objective of a reformed agricultural support package. This should not be eclipsed by piecemeal environmental measures.

The SFT's Sustainability Metrics project and ELMs Trial

Our harmonised framework of metrics has been accepted as an official trial for DEFRA's new 'Environmental Land Management scheme' (ELMs).The aim of the trial will be to refine and test the idea of introducing an annual sustainability assessment as a component of ELMs, using harmonised metrics

developed by farmers through a number of workshops and 25 on-farm trials over a period of 18 months (Oct 19 – Mar 21).

The current plethora of overlapping sustainability assessments and certification schemes is time-consuming, costly, and bureaucratic for farmers. It is also frustrating for government agencies, NGOs and food companies as well as confusing for consumers, who have no unified means of linking their purchasing power to support sustainable and healthy food production. Convinced that an opportunity existed for the development of a harmonised farm-level assessment to work alongside and complement these high-level frameworks, the SFT convened a small group of farmers and land managers to begin developing a model which drew from the best elements of what was already out there. We believe such a framework and common language would encourage continuous improvement on farms, enable governments to assess eligibility for farm support payments and provide consumers with a more accessible and easily understood means of evaluating the sustainability of food products in the market place.

Since 2017, the SFT's Farmers and Land Managers Working Group have been working to identify, categorise and develop metrics to populate the harmonised framework for on-farm sustainability assessments. The group includes representation from a wide range of farming typologies and scales, including: large-scale conventional arable; dairy; extensive beef and sheep; a mixed organic farming estate, and small scale organic dairy. Over the last three years, the group have commissioned a gap analysis of the most widely used sustainability assessment tools, identifying areas of overlap. This exercise further strengthened the case for harmonisation, as it revealed a 60% overlap of data between the different assessment tools and the information required by certification schemes.

The first workshop for our ELMs trial was held in November 2019, with the aim of refining the framework through a series of roundtables with farmers from across the country. Following this meeting, Dr Laurence Smith from the Royal Agricultural University is working to develop a self-assessment excel based tool, which we will begin testing on farm in the spring of 2020. This will be followed by a workshop in February to review the tool and the farm trial process. In parallel we will be hosting roundtables with key stakeholder groups, including farming bodies, certifiers, conversation and animal welfare groups, food business and the finance community to further refine the framework.