

National Food Strategy
Sustainable Food Trust written response
October 2019

Introduction

The Sustainable Food Trust (SFT) welcomes the opportunity to give a written response to the inquiry on this issue and would be pleased to provide further information, or to elaborate on any points.

The SFT is a small UK based organisation, established in 2011, that works in the UK and internationally to accelerate the transition to more sustainable food systems. We focus our work in three main areas:

- a. Leadership and Collaboration: Influencing leaders and policy makers
- b. Research and Policy: Enabling policy change based on sound science
- c. Communications: Acting as a source of information, sharing ideas and empowering citizens

Response

- **We need to link future UK diets to the output of sustainable farming systems.**

We need to align what people eat with the productive capacity of UK farming under sustainable management. This will mean we should educate the public to switch their food choices to reflect what the UK can produce through sustainable farming methods, while encouraging healthier diets. Such an approach would require adopting farming systems that are suited to the landscape and geography of the region and replacing the conventional farming practices that currently dominate farming across the UK with more regenerative approaches. Instead of continuing with a model that is characterised by high inputs of agrochemicals and intensive production, farmers would be encouraged to adopt regenerative farming systems that minimise inputs and build soil fertility with crop rotations and integrated livestock. The long-term effect of switching farming practices towards more regenerative methods would be to help improve both environmental and public health outcomes.

- **The majority of the vegetables eaten in the UK should come from regenerative systems.**

Nearly all the domestically produced vegetables that are consumed in the UK are sourced from intensive production systems.¹ Only 11,100 hectares of the UK grows organic fruit, nuts or

¹ Defra, Horticulture Statistics 2018, 2019, available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/822081/hort-report-01aug19.pdf

vegetables (including potatoes).² These intensive systems that cultivate monocultures without crop rotation cause damage to the environment, threaten public health and degrade soil fertility.³ Lower soil quality requires farmers to apply agrochemicals to support plant growth, which leads to a catch-22 situation with high levels of fertilisers and pesticides being applied, further impacting the soil.^{4 5 6}

As a result of these methods, the nutritional density of vegetables in the UK has decreased, while agrichemical residues have increased.^{7 8} We advocate for the reintegration of mixed farming through sustainable crop rotations so that fruit and vegetables produced in the UK would be grown in harmony with nature. This would mean adopting mixed farming that integrates crops and livestock. This integration is vital for a healthy, sustainable farm system because it builds soil fertility without the need for chemical fertilisers, and increases diversity, which is beneficial for both people and wildlife.⁹ The complementarity of crops and livestock means the farm system functions in a much more healthy, holistic way.

- **The critical role of grass-fed ruminants in fertility building crop rotations**

In the UK, the most effective way to reverse soil degradation is through the introduction of crop rotations, an element of which should include a restorative phase based on grass clover fertility building pastures, grazed by ruminants. The best way to reverse the decline in soil quality, that has resulted from long sequences of arable cropping, is through the introduction of crop rotations that include a fertility building stage, usually of grass and legumes. Since this section of the rotation can often span 50% of the timeframe, it is important that farmers are able to produce income from the fertility building period.¹⁰ The best way to achieve this is through the use of grass-fed ruminant livestock. Unfortunately the succession of recent reports that have advocated a switch towards mainly plant-based diets have failed to acknowledge the critical importance of a fertility building stage in a sustainable farming system, as a result of which market prices for ruminant (even

² Defra, Organic farming statistics 2018, 2019, available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/808791/organics-statsnotice-16may19.pdf

³ IDDRI, An Agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating, 2018, available here:

<https://www.soilassociation.org/media/18074/iddri-study-tyfa.pdf>

⁴ Defra, British Survey of Fertiliser Practice – Fertiliser use on farm for the 2018 crop year, available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/806642/fertiliseruse-statsnotice2018-06jun19.pdf

⁵ Pesticide Action Network UK, The Hidden Rise of UK Pesticide Use: Fact-checking an Industry Claim, 2018, available here: https://issuu.com/pan-uk/docs/the_hidden_rise_of_uk_pesticide_use?e=28041656/59634015

⁶ Soil Association, To plough or not to plough, 2018, available here: <https://www.soilassociation.org/media/17472/to-plough-or-not-to-plough-policy-briefing.pdf>

⁷ Scientific American, Dirt Poor: Have Fruit and Vegetables Become Less Nutritious? 2011, available here:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/soil-depletion-and-nutrition-loss/>

⁸ Science of the total environment, Pesticide residues in European agricultural soils – A hidden reality unfolded, Vol653, 2019, available here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969718343420>

⁹ IDDRI, An Agroecological Europe in 2050: multifunctional agriculture for healthy eating, 2018, available here:

<https://www.soilassociation.org/media/18074/iddri-study-tyfa.pdf>

¹⁰ Soil Association, Organic Arable Production: Rotations Factsheet, 2015, available online: <https://www.soilassociation.org/media/1884/factsheet-arable-rotations.pdf>

predominantly grass-fed) have now fallen below the cost of production.¹¹ As a consequence, farmers in the arable east of England are expressing extreme reluctance at the proposition of introducing a rotation with a grass clover element, since this section of the rotation would be loss making. To counter this, and to enable the widescale transition to regenerative farming systems, there needs to be an investment in educational campaigns promoting improved public understanding of the vital role that grass-fed ruminants play in a sustainable farming system.

- **We need to empower and educate consumers to support sustainable UK agriculture in the marketplace.**

There is a need for harmonised labelling schemes to allow the public to make informed decisions and to encourage consumers to opt for more environmentally sustainable food, which would more clearly communicate the various elements of sustainability of the farming system used to produce the food product. Current food labelling is confusing to the public and hinders the transition to sustainable methods of farming since consumers do not understand the difference between existing certification labels.¹² The best way to combat this confusion is through the introduction of an integrated labelling scheme, which could still use existing certification marks but would be based on harmonised categories and metrics through a single farm-based sustainability audit. An example would be the audit that the SFT is currently piloting.¹³ This would allow for much more effective communication to the public and would enable consumers to make an informed choice.

¹¹ ADHB Beef and Lamb, UK cattle yearbook, 2019, available here: http://beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CattleYearbook2019_190718_WEB_FINAL.pdf

¹² Ipsos and London Economics Consortium, Consumer market study on the functioning of voluntary food labelling schemes for consumers in the European Union EACH/FWC/2012 86 04, 2013, available online: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/food-labelling-scheme-final-report_en.pdf

¹³ Sustainable Food Trust, Hidden Cost of UK Food – Revised Edition, 2019, available here: <https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Website-Version-The-Hidden-Cost-of-UK-Food.pdf>