



PLOUGHING A LONE FURROW

FARMING POLICY POST-BREXIT

The vote to leave the EU means we have important choices and decisions to make about the future of our food and farming sectors.

As the UK gets set to go it alone, how can we ensure that post-Brexit farming in the UK helps family farms and rural communities to thrive while providing environmental benefits and increasing the UK's food security?

MOLLY SCOTT CATO
GREEN MEP FOR THE SOUTH WEST



‘ The extreme form of Brexit that Theresa May’s government is pushing for could prove hugely damaging to UK agriculture, hitting our family farmers and small scale food producers particularly hard. Around 65% of total UK agricultural exports go to the EU, while around 70% of the UK’s imports originate from other EU countries. A hard Brexit would remove us from the single market and risk imposing tariffs on exports and imports, while an end to free movement would make it impossible to take on seasonal migrant labour from EU countries.

But Brexit could also be a unique opportunity to move towards an ecologically sustainable farming system, one that focuses on relocalising food production, encourages biodiversity and animal welfare, promotes health and boosts our rural economies.

I HAVE COMMISSIONED TWO REPORTS which aim to help inform policy makers, farmers, food producers and rural communities on how we can transform agriculture post-Brexit. But ultimately, these reports are relevant to us all as we grapple with reshaping our economic, environmental and physical landscapes in the wake of the multiple challenges thrown up by the decision to leave the EU.

Each report has a slightly different focus. The first is by Simon Fairlie, with input from the Land Worker’s Alliance. Simon is a highly-regarded smallholder and editor of Land Magazine. The second is by the Soil Association, a leading charity promoting better food and farming. They also certify 70% of UK organic products.

Both reports envision a future in which soil health is protected and enhanced; where biodiversity and animal welfare is improved and where land use contributes to mitigating the impacts of climate change. They also both agree on the need to maintain or increase the amount currently received by farmers through the Common Agriculture Policy. But this investment must be retargeted towards rewarding farmers not landowners and focused on providing funding for advice, training and farmer-led research and innovation.

THE CURRENT LAY OF THE LAND

- The UK contributes around £7 billion a year towards the EU's agricultural budget. This compares to spending £142bn on health and £85bn on education.
- UK farmers receive about £3.3 billion in subsidies mainly in the form of 'direct payments' paid according to the amount of land owned or managed. This accounts for over 50 per cent of all UK farming income.
- This inefficient and inequitable way of supporting the farming industry has resulted in well over 20 per cent of all farms in the UK disappearing since 2000.

PLOUGHING A NEW FURROW: WHERE WE WANT TO GET TO

- ✓ **Safeguarding family farms**
- ✓ **Rewarding farmers not landowners**
- ✓ **Maintaining at least the same overall budget for farm payments**
- ✓ **Improved environmental management**
- ✓ **Prioritising animal welfare standards**
- ✓ **Investing in soil health and increasing soil carbon sequestration**
- ✓ **Enhanced biodiversity**
- ✓ **Discouraging the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and antibiotics**
- ✓ **Wise water management**
- ✓ **Reduced reliance on environmentally damaging imports, e.g. soya**
- ✓ **Investing in advice, training, research and innovation**

The Simon Fairlie report is available at: <http://mollymep.org.uk/agrireport/fairlie>. Further information about the Land Workers Alliance: <http://landworkersalliance.org.uk/>

The Soil Association report is available at: <http://mollymep.org.uk/agrireport/soilassoc>. For further information on the Soil Association: www.soilassociation.org

✓ **PLANTING IDEAS: SEVEN KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SIMON FAIRLIE**

- 1 RING-FENCE EXISTING CAP PAYMENTS FOR AGRICULTURE AND LAND MANAGEMENT** It is vital for the viability of the farming industry that at least £3.3 billion remains ring-fenced for agriculture. To improve environmental management and safeguard family farms we should also tap further into the £7 billion the UK currently contributes towards the EU agricultural budget.
- 2 SCRAP DIRECT PAYMENTS** These have inflated the value of farmland, representing a benefit to landowners rather than farmers, and do little to incentivize good practice.
- 3 ESTABLISH A WHOLE FARM MANAGEMENT SCHEME, PROVIDING SUBSIDIES TO FARMERS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS** A 'one stop shop' for land managers would enable farmers to map out a full range of environmental benefits and infrastructural improvements on a whole farm basis. Subsidies should support environmental benefits, improve soil health, enhance biodiversity and improve water management. New grants to support Community Supported Agriculture schemes, farm-based village shops, or new entrants to the sector could help foster vibrant rural economies.



Molly visiting Helen Browning's farm in Wiltshire.



- 4 PROVIDE A GOVERNMENT FUNDED AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY SERVICE** The government should re-establish a free agricultural advisory service providing information to all land managers on sound agricultural practice. This service could be based in agricultural colleges as it is in the USA.
- 5 PROVIDE A SAFETY NET FOR SECTORS IN DIFFICULTY** Extra assistance through targeted payments or by a government supported insurance scheme. For the dairy industry, there could be a case for reviving a Milk Marketing Board.
- 6 INTRODUCE 20 PER CENT VAT ON MEAT PRODUCTS** To help reduce animal feed consumption and reduce net greenhouse gas emissions, meat products should be taxed. Small-scale farmers selling meat direct to consumers would not be affected, but factory farms and other larger scale producers would be.
- 7 REQUIRE 'POLLUTER PAYS' LABELLING ON FOOD PRODUCTS** Food products that involve the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and GM materials should be labelled as such. Farmers and retailers who employ these measures should bear the cost of informing the public of their use.

SIX GAME-CHANGING IDEAS FROM THE SOIL ASSOCIATION

- 1 AGROFORESTRY AT SCALE** The use of trees within agricultural systems delivers multiple benefits such as increased productivity, resilience, wildlife, soil health, and carbon storage. A new national agroforestry strategy would encourage planting trees on farms.

- 2 INVESTING IN SOIL** The fundamental importance of soil health to farm productivity, food security, climate change and public health has been neglected by Government for far too long. There need to be strong policies to restore and protect soil, including soil stewardship payments and regular monitoring and reporting of soil health.
- 3 A TIPPING POINT FOR ORGANIC** The benefits of organic farming have been well documented for decades: more wildlife, carbon storage, flood protection, low pesticide and antibiotic use, more jobs, and healthier food. We need a new organic strategy for England focussing on research, sharing good practice, promotion and marketing.
- 4 A GOOD LIFE FOR ALL FARM ANIMALS** The Government should commit to all farm animals having a 'good life', which would include incentives and funding to transform farms into high welfare systems, as well as banning the routine preventative use of antibiotics in livestock farming.
- 5 BACK FARMER-LED INNOVATION** The success of the UK's agriculture will depend on innovation by farmers. Policies to support this should include a dedicated farmer innovation fund, and recognising and rewarding scientists whose work supports farmers.
- 6 MAKING THE MOST OF PUBLIC PROCUREMENT** The UK public sector spends £2.4 billion each year procuring food and catering services. Making the most of public procurement could be game-changing, by driving demand for food that meets the highest standards, whilst helping to achieve economies of scale in processing and lowering consumer prices.



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