



The future of British farming outside the EU

A discussion paper by the Soil Association for Molly Scott Cato MEP

Executive summary

This report sets out six proposals for domestic agricultural policy after the UK leaves the EU. These are game-changing ideas that have the potential to transform farming and land use at the scale and pace required to meet multiple challenges - from tackling climate change and nature degradation to supporting rural livelihoods and improving public health. Every farming practice we talk about here already happens on the ground in the UK, but is currently the exception rather than the norm.

There is growing consensus on some of the key principles that should underlie new policy:

- We need to maintain high environmental and farm animal welfare standards.
- Public money should pay for public goods such as clean water, farmland wildlife, carbon storage and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- Government should maintain the overall annual farm payment budget of around £3.2 billion.
- We need a joined-up approach that looks at land in the round – farming, forestry, water, wilderness – taking account of public health, food poverty and international development.
- Policies must work for farmers and growers, and help them move towards sustainable business models.
- We need a renewed focus on supply chains to improve resilience, farmer incomes, and environmental sustainability.
- Public participation in debate and decisions on the future of farming is critical.

Proposal 1: a national agroforestry strategy

Agroforestry brings trees into fields. They can be in neat rows through crops like wheat, dotted through pasture like parkland, or planted closer together to provide cover for plants or animals.

Agroforestry is game-changing because it can increase yields and farm profitability, boost resilience through diversity, and deliver big environmental benefits at the same time. At scale, it would dramatically help mitigate soil erosion, nitrogen leaching, and biodiversity loss while increasing carbon sequestration.

To deliver these benefits, the government should work with the agricultural, forestry and land use sectors to develop a national agroforestry strategy. This should include:

- A target of agroforestry on 50% of all farms by 2030.
- Clear ownership and accountability within government.
- Capital grants and maintenance payments.
- Fiscal measures and procurement policies to grow the domestic market.
- Incentives for longer term farm tenancies.
- Investment in research, knowledge exchange and advice.

Proposal 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. Recent statements from UK ministers on soil health are welcome, but have not been matched by action.

The government's existing soil health commitments provide a starting point for a new UK policy framework: the global *4 per 1000* soil carbon initiative, aiming to increase soil organic carbon by 0.4% each year; and the aim for all English soils to be managed sustainably and degradation threats tackled successfully by 2030.

Strong policies to restore and protect soil health in the UK's post-CAP agricultural framework should include:

- Soil stewardship payments to incentivise farmers to increase the organic matter in the soil – including through existing farm assurance schemes such as organic and LEAF.
- Regular soil organic matter monitoring and reporting by farmers to form a well-maintained national database, alongside investment in soil health research, data collection and monitoring.

- Encouraging soil health improvement by making it a requirement of tenancies that soil health is not degraded during their term.
- A nitrogen budget for each nation of the UK – following Scotland’s lead.
- Modelling and piloting of new mechanisms to lower nitrogen such as fiscal measures.

Proposal 3: a tipping point for organic

The public benefits delivered by organic farming have been well documented by independent research over decades. They include more wildlife and biodiversity, healthier soils and carbon storage, flood protection, clean water, lower pesticide and antibiotic use, more jobs and healthier food.

While only 3% of farmland in the UK is organic, British consumers are demanding more organic produce, with the UK organic food and drink market seeing four years of successive growth. With organic farmland more or less stable, much of this growth is being met by imports, particularly of raw materials for animal feed.

In some other countries, organic farming accounts for up to a fifth of production, and sets new norms for policy, business and the public. Reaching such a tipping point would be game-changing. We propose an organic strategy for England, developed by government in partnership with the organic sector, which includes:

- An expansion of organic promotion and marketing – including opportunities for export.
- Maintaining, improving and expanding the organic conversion and maintenance payments, as currently operating under Countryside Stewardship for England.
- A particular focus on increasing production of home-grown organic fruit and veg and animal feed, to meet demand and reduce the high reliance on imports.
- Better procurement policies (see also Proposal 6).
- Assessing the expansion of organic and other certification systems as a gateway to automatic eligibility for farmers to receive payments.
- Research, innovation and knowledge sharing through ‘field labs’ and farming advisory services.
- Encouraging agricultural colleges to offer more courses in organic and agroecological farming practices alongside new organic apprenticeships.
- Maintaining the legal base for organic standards, ensuring alignment with the EU organic regulation.

Proposal 4: a good life for farm animals

Insisting on a good life for all farm animals as a core part of post-Brexit agricultural policy would be game-changing. It would mean switching to better farming systems, not just making tweaks, and also bring benefits to public health through dietary changes.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council defines three levels of welfare: a life not worth living, a life worth living, and a good life. A good life involves more than simply being free from pain or disease. It means ensuring animals have the choice to feel the sun on their backs and to follow their urges to care, graze, root and play.

The scale of indoor, intensive farms is increasing, pushing out smaller family farms to make way for industrial systems that affect local communities and the environment as well as the animals themselves.

We propose that the UK sets the ambition that all farm animals should have a 'good life' within ten years. Hand-in-hand with stronger regulation, this will require public investment to help farmers adjust their infrastructure and businesses. This will require:

- Defining a good life by urgently supporting the development of a rigorous framework that can score farms, supply chains and assurance schemes against the tiers set out by the Farm Animal Welfare Council.
- Mandatory method of production labelling to empower consumers, level the playing field and allow more farmers to shift from volume to quality production.
- Banning the routine, preventative use of antibiotics in livestock farming and strict targets to reduce farm antibiotic use 50% by 2020, and 80% by 2050.
- Incentives and funding to make the transition to extensive, high welfare farming systems, ensuring such systems are the most attractive option for farmers and investors.

Proposal 5: back farmer innovation

The success of UK agriculture post-Brexit will depend on innovation by farmers. Policies should recognise and support this.

The starting point is that thousands of UK farmers already investigate, experiment, design and develop. Helping them share the risk and increase the rigour of this would benefit all of agriculture, at relatively low cost.

The UK spends around £450 million a year on agricultural research and innovation. Only a fraction of this, perhaps as little as 1%, goes to practical projects led by farmers. We propose:

- A dedicated farmer innovation fund with a budget of at least 10% of the UK's public agricultural research and development budget.

- Innovation support services to help farmers apply and make the most of new funds, building on experience from other countries of doing this through the European Innovation Partnership (EIP-Agri), and of home-grown initiatives such as Innovative Farmers.
- Rewarding practical research by incentivising individual researchers and institutions to pay more attention to the impact of their research, for example, through awards schemes for researchers working on farmer-led projects; training; and involvement of farmers and practitioners in reviewing research grant applications.

Proposal 6: making the most of public procurement

Making the most of public procurement could be game-changing. The UK public sector serves some 3.5 million meals each weekday across settings as varied as schools, nurseries, care homes, hospitals and prisons. In total, the UK public sector spends £2.4 billion each year procuring food and catering services.

While the cost of sourcing higher quality ingredients is perceived as a barrier, this can be counterbalanced by re-formulating menus. 71% of public sector institutions meeting Food for Life Served Here criteria report the implementation was cost neutral and 29% report overall cost savings. Research by the New Economics Foundation demonstrated £3 in social return for every £1 invested in Food for Life, with most of the benefit experienced by local businesses and local employers.

The UK could improve the health and food habits of the next generation by further upping ambitions for school food. It could also help drive demand for food that meets the highest standards, helping to achieve economies of scale in processing and lowering consumer prices. Government should help make this happen by:

- Implementing the Balanced Scorecard approach across the whole public sector - not just central government.
- Requiring public procurement decisions to place a weighting of at least 60% on quality, with price not to exceed a 40% weighting.
- Comparing the cost-effectiveness of delivering public benefits through direct agri-environment payments to farmers compared with growing the demand for assured products such as organic through public procurement – with a view to topping up public catering budgets where cost is a genuine barrier.
- Using schemes such as Food for Life Served Here for independent verification, to increase the uptake of assurance schemes and grow the market for more sustainable farming and food.