

A vision for land management

Policy Briefing April 2019

We cannot meet the Paris Agreement commitments without reducing emissions from animal agriculture. People are already changing their diets. As such, an environmental and economic opportunity for British agriculture presents itself. Here we outline viable transformative ideas which would nourish people and planet.

A public good for all

The economy needs a vibrant ecology. Our land is a fragile home – for humans and non-humans – irreplaceable, easy to damage and slow to repair.

Land use policy must be integrated with wider ambitions of equality, justice, protecting the planet and public health. This requires fair conditions for land managers, supporting sustainable communities, ethical food production, and enabling animals to live freely in healthy habitats.

Good land management supports vital public goods including public health and environmental sustainability. Most people agree that it is wrong to harm animals unnecessarily. So moving to plant-based diets and agriculture creates public goods.

A broken food system

The UK's food system is fundamentally broken. While it delivers a large amount of food to the consumer at low prices, this comes at the expense of almost every other objective that we might reasonably expect from a food system. The system is environmentally unsustainable, energy-intensive, highly concentrated, and often fails to support good jobs.

It is highly complex and opaque, unequal, unhealthy and volatile. In terms of environmental sustainability, while every sector of the economy is making moves to lower its inputs and emissions, it is the agriculture sector that is consistently lagging behind in relation to various environmental challenges.

Food for the future

Protein crops – plants with high levels of natural proteins such as peas, beans, and lentils – could shake up UK agriculture. Protein crops are

consistently highlighted as a solution to the wide-ranging demands placed on UK farming. And yet the cultivation of these crops in the UK continues to be very limited. Protein crops barely register in national production statistics or are left out entirely.

Pulses are nitrogen-fixing crops, taking their nitrogen from the air and depositing it in the soil. Unlike most crops, the use of resource-intensive nitrogen fertilisers is not usually required.

For consumers, pulses can contribute to a healthy diet through their high protein content and are also a good source of iron and fibre. By transitioning away from animal proteins and towards protein crops, there is a range of secondary benefits (e.g. reduced methane emissions, reduced water use, and respecting animal rights) from the reduced impacts of animal agriculture.

If UK diets are to be sustainable, healthy, affordable and ethical, it is clear that protein crops represent a win-win-win-win. A shift to plant proteins, especially as a substitute for animal proteins, is desperately needed.

The impact of Brexit

The exit of the UK from the EU, and thus the Common Agricultural Policy, implies inevitable overhaul of the agricultural system. Whereas in most sectors the bulk of income is constituted by sales of goods and services in the market, for the farming sector over half of total farming income comes from subsidies. Correctly designed, the 'public money for public good' approach could and should benefit protein crops, with their high contribution to public health and low environmental impact, and their potential for more widespread UK cultivation and consumption.

Barriers to development

The failure of protein crops to spark widespread interest from UK farmers can be traced to a number of barriers. These barriers are complex, interwoven, and exist at different levels of the food system.

At the farm-level protein crops are not widely cultivated due to lower economic returns compared to other, more profitable, alternatives. Subsidies, an important revenue source for UK farms, are not currently directed more towards protein crops than other alternatives.

There are also more systemic barriers. There is a lack of knowledge from both producers and consumers about the potential benefits of protein crops. Agricultural research and development tends to follow existing levels of production, just as market power and political representation is concentrated around large, existing producers.

Carbon-cutting

Food Climate Research Network's Dr Tara Garnett explains that 'Eating grass-fed beef isn't going to help fight climate change'. Even organic animal farming is highly polluting. Fewer cattle and sheep leaves room for deer, reduces zoonotic diseases and cuts our carbon footprint. Whilst an overnight shift to plant-based is not realistic, Hayek and Harwatt point out in their recent report that by restoring all land associated with animal farming – pasture and feed – to its natural habitat we would save 12 years' worth of current UK greenhouse gas emissions.

Agroforestry or rewilding could greatly aid the UK. Much of our land would naturally be ancient woodland, but currently 87% of the UK is unwooded. The UK forestry product deficit is already £3 billion. Agroforestry can provide good livelihoods and many renewable resources, support sustainable tourism, create animal habitats, and yield healthy food. Extending semi-natural woodlands through fencing, succession and upland planting can also reduce flooding and sequester carbon. Fences can guide free-living animals to avoid saplands or visit grasslands.

Supporting our farmers

If we are to put the environment at the centre of land management policy, we need a drastic shift in the way farmers are supported. Farmers can be funded to take positive environmental steps as part of a public goods policy, but those who produce animal products must also be encouraged to consider the inherent damages of their trade. Farmers looking to move out of animal farming to

more environmentally-friendly, ethical practices must be given financial support to do so. Weighting incentives towards food production that is healthier for people and planet would be a truly sustainable measure.

In addition, initiatives such as a Universal Basic Living Income scheme could support new and existing land managers to innovate.

We need a sustainable, healthy food system, which means fewer livestock and more stockfree farms. The Organic Research Centre and the Stockfree Organic Services, including Soil Association adviser Iain Tolhurst, are already demonstrating stockfree farming in the UK.

Recommendations

Our policy recommendations for the UK government are:

-  Increase education of (potential) growers and the supply chain about the environmental and economic benefits of pulse production.
-  Direct subsidies more towards protein crops than other alternatives (such as animal protein)
-  Designate funding for market and research development, working with other trade and research organisations to identify priorities and taking a unified approach.
-  Use Climate Finance to support rewilding and agroforestry for land that can't be used for pulse production.
-  Work with us to develop a package of support for farmers willing to transition out of animal farming.

These proposals would put the UK at the forefront of countries leading the way for sustainable, healthy and equitable land use and food systems– inspiring not a race to the bottom in standards, but acting as a role model for other countries to follow.

www.vegansociety.com/growgreen
campaigns@vegansociety.com
[@GrowGreenTeam](https://www.instagram.com/GrowGreenTeam)

© The Vegan Society, April 2019 with contributions from New Economics Foundation on the benefits of plant-protein crops.