

Forging a way forward

A Consensus on Food, Farming and Nature



Introduction

A group of farmers and environmental organisations met in the margins of the 2023 Oxford farming conferences to forge consensus on a way forward for farming, recognising the huge pressures that many farming sectors are currently experiencing. This consensus rests on a shared understanding that:

- A healthy natural environment underpins food security.
- Farming does not just produce the food we eat but is also central to efforts to tackle the nature, climate, and public health crises.
- Diversity - in nature, in farming systems and amongst those involved in farming - along with diversity in farm animals and crops, will enable resilience and innovation in the face of climate change and economic challenges.

From the meeting a consensus emerged, and the informal grouping invites further discussion and engagement on this. It is vital to find common ground and show solidarity across farming, food, and environmental interests so that policy makers and supply chain actors can have the confidence to act in ways that will support a vibrant future for food, farming, and nature, in service of our citizens.

Much great work is already being done by farming businesses, governments and NGOs, but we need the economic and regulatory frameworks that will ensure all food production meets the needs of people and planet.



Everywhere we go we meet farmers who want to do the right thing for nature alongside producing the healthy food we all need. We both hear ambition, willingness and a real "can-do" attitude to finding solutions to the current crises. Now, more than ever, everyone needs to work together to find common ground and forge a grassroots consensus on a way forward.

Beccy Speight, RSPB CEO and Helen Browning, Soil Association CEO

Our Consensus

Fixing the food system is a global challenge. The countries and regions of the UK all have a vital role to play.

Farming can produce enough healthy food to nourish everyone in a way that helps to heal the planet. Yet the perversity of the current food system means that the way much food is produced, processed, and marketed today is making people and the planet unhealthy, undermining the ability to feed ourselves and future generations in the UK and globally.

We believe that now is the time to transform the food system, ensuring diets sit within planetary boundaries whilst farmers receive a fair market return for the food they produce and reward for the public goods delivered. The prize for this transformation is healthier people, resilient farming livelihoods, prosperous rural communities, thriving wildlife, and a stable climate.

Many already see farming and nature as interdependent and mutually beneficial. We believe there is quiet revolution in the fields and hills proving that farming can be part of the solution to the nature and climate crises, and that thriving wildlife, healthy soils and climate resilience underpin prosperous and productive farming businesses.

We want to see strong leadership from the UK and devolved governments to ensure a food and farming system fit for the future. This new future must work for all tenants, commoners, crofters, and landowners, with public money rewarding the delivery of public goods, and markets paying a fair price for food and other private goods. This is essential to ensure resilient and profitable farming businesses.

Failure to act will leave us and the planet less healthy, and less able to feed everyone well.

The sector's narrow focus on output-at-all-costs has put our food production in a precarious position. We must broaden our view of a good food system comprising greater diversity, health, nature recovery and climate action. This work represents a pivotal moment in the agriculture transition by making a clear case for a fairer, nature-friendly farming future with farmers at its heart.

Hywel Morgan, Esgair Llaethdy Farm



We think farming of the future must embrace:



Nature as an ally for food and farming

Reviving nature and acting on climate change is not opposed to food production, but a precondition for it. The farming system of the future must create more opportunities for nature, both within farmland and in the wider landscape, alongside food production. This is essential to maintain the productive capacity of the land and ensure profitable and resilient farm businesses, whilst helping to meet nature and climate goals. Managing good quality wildlife habitats on farm can recover a range of species above and below ground, whilst boosting pollination and pest predation services.

Breaking agrochemical dependency

Farming should be supported to harness the power of nature and cultural methods, to enable a radical reduction in pesticide use and to adopt a more cyclical approach to nutrient management, helping to break the dependency on artificial inputs and fossil fuels. Access to independent and impartial advice is needed to achieve this. Whilst this is a critical step to achieve climate, nature, and water quality goals, it is also a way to enable farmers to reduce business costs and improve profitability.

Regenerative soil management

Rebuilding healthy soils is fundamental to their ability to support food production, mitigate and adapt to climate change and recover wildlife. Regenerative soil management needs to be the norm, and this will mean an ongoing role for livestock to help build fertility, alongside changes to tillage, more diverse crop rotations and practices such as cover cropping. This should be allied with a transition away from intensive livestock systems which can divert food crops away from human consumption.

Responsible Innovation

Technology can play a role in new modes of sustainable food production, including decarbonisation. Investment should flow towards environmentally positive innovation including organic, agroecological and regenerative farming practices that build on tried-and-tested traditional husbandry.

We think unleashing this new future for farming requires:

Proper public investment in public goods

Investment in public goods must meet the scale of environmental need, unlocking the power of the farming sector to tackle the nature and climate crises, whilst producing sufficient healthy and nutritious food. All farmers, whether tenants, commoners, or landowners should be able to access public goods schemes.

Access to affordable, trusted and quality advice and training is critical to improving environmental delivery and productivity. Governments should maintain at least the current agricultural budget in real terms to 2030 and ensure that the majority of this is used to drive and reward the delivery of public goods by farmers and other land managers.

Well-regulated and aligned private and public finance

Private finance cannot replace public investment but has an important supplementary role. In addition to providing public funding, governments have a key role in helping establish well-regulated private markets in ecosystem services, to secure further investment to reward environmental delivery and to support farmers in creating diverse and resilient farm businesses.

A level playing field

Regulation should set a fair but firm baseline for all farm businesses to protect the natural environment. This also should include the regulation of supply chains to ensure farmers can receive a fair return from the market and maintain competitiveness in a global market.

Setting high environmental and welfare standards for trade

Governments must commit to core environmental and animal welfare standards in trade to protect British standards, support UK farmers and raise standards globally.

There is no quick fix to the problems of our food and farming systems, but there is strength in numbers. Water, soil, habitats and biodiversity aren't just assets, they're the building blocks of how we feed ourselves, and their health is a precondition for viable farm business. We can do many things to ensure this vision of our future food system comes to fruition, and this consensus clarifies the actions needed to ensure change happens.

Martin Lines - Nature Friendly Farming Network, UK Chair



Making the most of land

A strategic approach to land use throughout the UK must provide the opportunity to balance the different demands we put on land to optimise its use, whilst also helping to allocate public and private funding effectively. Not all land is equally productive for food, so a strategic approach to land use can help match farming practices to the carrying capacity of the land. All farming needs to be nature and climate friendly.

On high yielding land, for example, regenerative practices and the use of 'eco-infrastructure' such as wildflower habitats, shelter belts and hedges can boost pollinators and pest control services to help sustainably optimise yields. Less productive land can support more extensive farming practices, including those which create and maintain semi-natural habitats, including meadows, heath, and wood pasture, which are so critical to absorb greenhouse gases and help recover nature. To tackle the nature and climate crises, it is also critical to protect, restore and create woodlands, wetlands, and peatlands.

Achieving healthy diets and owning our footprint

Everyone should have access to a healthy diet that is in balance with the carrying capacity of nature. UK and devolved governments have a central role in driving change to enable everyone to eat healthily, affordably, and sustainably, whilst helping to tackle food waste and bring our food system within planetary boundaries.

This can be done by reducing food waste throughout the whole supply chain, ensuring the affordability and availability of fresh fruit and vegetables for all, tackling the aggressive marketing of unhealthy ultra-processed foods to both children and adults and the creative use of public procurement. Everyone should be able to afford a healthy and sustainable diet.

No two farming systems are the same, but we must recognise that we're all bound by the need to work with nature and not against it. A healthy ecosystem means a healthy bottom line. Healthy soils are biodiverse and serve as the baseline of production and key to reducing input costs. Thriving biodiversity not just around our fields but across our whole farms including our soils, provides us with a vital range of ecosystem services for free. The future must be focused on regeneration - but farmers cannot do all this alone. This work is crucial in demonstrating widespread support for a food system that most farmers want and society needs.

Denise Walton, Peelham Farms



Consensus signed by:

Beccy Speight, CEO, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
Christopher Price, CEO, Rare Breeds Survival Trust
Professor Chris Short, Chair of Foundation for Common Land
Craig Bennett, CEO, The Wildlife Trusts
Darren Moorcroft, CEO, Woodland Trust
Harry Bowell, Director Land and Nature, National Trust
Helen Browning, CEO, Soil Association
Jimmy Woodrow, CEO, Pasture for Life
Kate Norgrove, Executive Director of Advocacy & Campaigns, WWF-UK
Kath Dalmeny, CEO, Sustain
Martin Lines, UK Chair, Nature Friendly farming Network (NFFN)
Richard Benwell, CEO, Wildlife and Countryside Link
Shaun Spiers, CEO, Green Alliance
Simon Billing, Executive Director, Eating Better Alliance
Sue Pritchard, CEO, Food, Farming and Countryside Commission
Tom Fyans, Interim CEO, CPRE (The countryside Charity)

And supported by:

Anthony Curwen, Quex Park Country Estate
Denise Walton, Peelham Farms
Hywel Morgan, Esgairllaethdy Myddfai
Jake Fiennes, Director of Holkham Nature Reserve Ltd
James Robinson, Strickley Farm
Johnnie Balfour, Balbirnie Home Farms
Professor Julia Aglionby, University of Cumbria
Michael Meharg, Fort Farm
Phil Knott, Wildlife Croft
Helen Keys, Mallon Farm
Sam Kenyon, Glanllyn Farm
Professor Tom Macmillan, Royal Agricultural University

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