



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

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APPG chair calls for renewed policy focus on sustainable intensification in agriculture

Current development of future farm support policies ‘over-reliant on voluntary and campaigning NGOs’, says farming MP

A prominent pro-farming MP has warned that the National Audit Office’s [report](#) this week criticising Defra for its failure to deliver core parts of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme to replace EU subsidies is symptomatic of a wider shift away from science- and evidence-based policy-making within the Department, and towards an over-reliance on voluntary and campaigning NGOs to support the Government’s (as yet undefined) ‘path to sustainable agriculture’.

Julian Sturdy MP, a member of the EFRA Committee and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture, said the production of food increasingly appeared to be of secondary importance to Defra as the list of ELM test and trial projects – set to frame much of the future support available to farmers – includes strategically significant projects led by campaigning NGOs such as the Soil Association, Sustainable Food Trust, RSPB, Green Alliance and BugLife, as well as a myriad of local wildlife trusts.

Where does a profitable and commercially-focused farming industry fit in to this path of agricultural transition, and where is the input from established agricultural research organisations, Mr Sturdy asked.

“The All-Party Group recently hosted a session to ask the question ‘Whatever happened to Sustainable Intensification?’, with contributions from leading UK experts in the fields of crop science, agricultural economics, rural policy and conservation science. The meeting highlighted genuine concerns that the policy focus on ‘sustainable intensification’ has been shelved in favour of a transition to support for less productive farming systems,” said Mr Sturdy.

“It is just 10 years since Sir John Beddington’s Foresight Report on global food security warned of a ‘perfect storm’ of population growth, demographic change, natural resource depletion and climate change, and urged the UK Government to take a lead in promoting ‘sustainable intensification’ in agriculture – optimising the productive capacity of our agriculture and food production systems while minimising resource use and environmental impact.”

“One of the primary UK Government responses to the Foresight Report was the Defra Sustainable Intensification Research Programme (SIP), a major (£4.5m over 4 years), multi-partner research programme to investigate the challenge of securing the

optimum balance between food production, resource use and environmental protection.”

“None of the global pressures identified in the Foresight report have disappeared, in fact they have probably intensified. The UN FAO Food Prices Index is currently nudging levels similar to the food price spikes of 2008 that prompted food riots in 30 countries. And yet while the concept of sustainable intensification and the scientific rationale which underpins it remain as relevant and urgent as ever, the outputs, recommendations and advice generated as part of the Defra SIP platform appear to have been quietly shelved and forgotten.”

“It makes no sense to encourage more extensive systems of production here and simply export our food system impacts when the UK is blessed with good soils, a temperate climate, a highly professional and well-equipped farming sector and world-leading research institutes. The Defra SIP programme was led by many of those recognised research organisations – NIAB, ADAS, Rothamsted Research, Fera, CEH and leading agricultural universities such as Exeter, Nottingham and Bangor. How many of those same organisations are leading, or even involved in, the ELMS test and trial projects?” he asked.

Mr Sturdy urged Defra Ministers to listen to the weight of scientific evidence pointing to a need to optimise productivity and production efficiency on existing farmland, using the latest scientific knowledge and technological innovation, so reducing pressure on unfarmed habitats and environments – here and elsewhere - and minimising agriculture’s external impacts per unit of food produced.

“Professor Andrew Balmford, a leading conservation scientist at the University of Cambridge, told the All-Party Group earlier this week that the most effective way to protect habitats and prevent further biodiversity loss is through hi-tech, high-yield production on land that is already farmed, mirrored by explicit policy incentives and regulations to make sure other land is set-aside for nature. It turns out this is also the most efficient way to meet climate change objectives through increased opportunities for carbon sequestration and storage.”

“As a matter of urgency, Government must revisit, reinvigorate and restore the policy focus on sustainable intensification as the most effective way - perhaps the only way - to feed an increasingly hungry, warming planet,” he concluded.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture exists to promote debate among politicians and other stakeholders on the value and role of scientific innovation in UK agriculture. The Group works to ensure that the Government’s support for agri-science is maintained and strengthened, that the regulatory environment is evidence-based and enabling, and that the contribution of modern agriculture to our society, economy and environment is valued and understood as widely as possible.

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