

Sustain Written Evidence - UK Agriculture Bill 2019-20 Committee Stage

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture and promote equity. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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Comments on the Agriculture Bill

The new Agriculture Bill is the first major UK legislation on agriculture in 50 years. If enacted in full and with sufficient resources, it has the potential to deliver significant benefits over the current European system.

We welcome the retention of the key new approach to provide financial support for public outcomes (or 'goods') that the market cannot, or can only partially, deliver such as high environmental and animal welfare standards, and supporting good practice. This should be enhanced by making it a duty to deliver this via the Environmental Land Management scheme.

We welcome the changes to the Bill on support for soil health, on fair dealing, for ancillary services, such as small abattoirs and on multi-annual financial assistance planning and reporting. The Food Security review clause is also welcome but needs broadening in focus.

The Sustain alliance wants to make the best use of this opportunity to influence UK farm policy and practice. This is made especially urgent due to the need for the UK to take decisive action on farm livelihoods, working conditions, public health, animal welfare, biodiversity, environmental protection and climate change. This briefing has been produced by Sustainable Farming Coordinator for the Sustain alliance, Vicki Hird, in consultation with working party members and others. We also support Greener UK/WCL alliance proposals and background [here](#).

We are seeking your support at Second Reading for the amendments in the following areas to fairly support farmers and workers, the climate and nature emergency and for the supply of safe healthy food:

1. The retention of the Fair Dealing Clause 27 and making a duty to deliver

We very much welcome the Government's commitment to fair dealing and transparency in the supply chain and in particular by the retention of Clause 27 on *Fair Dealing of business purchasers of agricultural produce*, and the amendments the government has made to this clause (page 22).

We need to see this clause as a **duty** given the urgent need to form a new set of statutory Codes for each sector and an enforcement capability to ensure farmers and growers are protected from abusive practices.

2. Rules for agri-food imports

New trade policy and agreements must not allow a lowering of food, animal welfare, environmental and labour standards. UK farmers and growers should be able to compete on a level playing field. We need a clause to ensure agri-food imports are required to be produced to the same food, environment, labour and animal welfare regulations as our own. UK farmers should not be undercut by imported food produced to lower standards. The amendments already tabled by MPs are useful proposals to deliver this outcome.

3. An amendment to deliver agroecological whole farm systems

We welcome the reference to *support better understanding* of ‘agroecology’ in Clause 1(1)(5) of the Bill. However a new clause is needed to create a specific commitment under 1(1) for financial and wider support for existing agroecological farms (such as organic) and to ensure all farmers can develop agroecological practices on the whole farm.

A sub clause in 1(1) could for instance include financial support for “*establishing and maintaining whole farm agroecological systems.*” We have the following reasons for this:

1) Agroecology integrates food production with delivery of environmental and social public goods - to allow for support and incentives for farmers to continue to produce food whilst delivering public goods in a method defined as agroecology. This would ensure farmers can transition to ecological farming models, producing food whilst restoring the environment and nature.¹ A recent IDDRI modelling report makes it clear a 10 year transition to agro-ecological farming could deliver both the food and environmental outcomes needed.²

2) Farmers will be rewarded for whole farm action - not only for *managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment*, but for doing so across the whole farm in an integrated way. Agro-ecological systems can deliver a higher level of benefits and co-benefits such as, on organic farms supporting 50% more wildlife than on conventionally farmed land, and healthier soils with 44% higher capacity to store long term soil carbon. These benefits are enhanced by the integrated and diverse nature of such approaches as a part of the whole farm system rather than in reserved areas or only on the margins.

3) Delivering social benefits. Agroecological farms can create employment and new enterprise as well as public access to nutritious, affordable fruit and vegetables, and community projects for public education about food growing, how to cook it, so supporting improved public health and enterprise.

4. An amendment to insert a public health purpose into the Bill

We would like support for an amendment to the Agriculture Bill which would make public health an explicit Bill purpose and would like to suggest some of the possible measures:

- (a) *increase the availability, affordability, diversity, quality and marketing of fruit and vegetables and pulses,*
- (b) *reduce farm antibiotic and related veterinary product use, and antibiotic resistance in harmful micro-organisms, through improved animal health and improved animal welfare,*
- (c) *provide support for farmers to diversify out of domestic production of foods where there may be reduced demand due to public concerns over issues such as health, environment, and animal welfare*
- (d) *reduce harm from use of chemicals on farms, and reduce pesticide residues in food.*

Why an amendment for a public health purpose?

We have the opportunity now to ensure UK farm policy delivers public benefits like tackling climate change and nature loss. What is less well agreed is the need to protect public health via agriculture policy. In the same way that farming fundamentally affects our environment, food consumption is one of the key determinants of human health, and farmers would like the opportunity to gain support for health benefits.

Action is clearly needed beyond the farm gate to curb the processing and marketing of unhealthy or unsafe foods. But it is also vital to ensure farm policy promotes healthy food production and does not support continued production of foods or operations of systems that contribute to unhealthy or unsafe diets with a

¹ See valuable agro-ecological background [here](#) and a briefing on farmers in action [here](#)

² <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/study/agroecological-europe-2050-multifunctional-agriculture-healthy-eating>

significant cost to society and the economy.³ We need unambiguous commitment to public health goals in the Bill and, where possible, specific support to enable outcomes beneficial to public health such as:

- Measures to increase the availability, affordability and accessibility of UK-grown, sustainably produced fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts and pulses. Any environmental implications could be addressed through safeguards or regulation built into the schemes and via the Environment Bill;
- Tackling antibiotic resistance: support, alongside stronger regulation, for improvements to animal health, breeding husbandry, and housing required to reduce the need for antibiotics, and to help farmers transition to extensive, high welfare farming systems;
- Delivering healthy sustainable diets (following the Government's Eatwell plate), reduced harm from use of chemicals on farm, and reduced pesticides residues in food;
- Clear, enforceable method of production labelling, including a proper definition of "grass-fed" to mean wholly pasture-fed, to give consumers the ability to make healthy, sustainable choices.

5. Include a review of the impact of Act on agricultural workers

We are seeking support for a new clause in the Agriculture Bill which would require the Secretary of State to report on the impact of the Act on agricultural workers in England (such as on living standards, pay, condition of employment, and accommodation), and to consult on the findings of that report and the merits of establishing a sector negotiating body.

This would start to put the 140,000 workers in England on the same footing as workers in the other three nations in the UK (Scotland and Northern Ireland have Wages Boards and Wales has an Agricultural Advisory Panel).

We outline more data and background to this proposal in our report "*Why would anyone want to pick our crops?*" available on the Sustain website. We also have a draft clause to present.

(https://www.sustainweb.org/publications/why_pick_crops_newreport/?section=)

6. Further vital changes to the Bill regarding

- **reference to provision of adequate training , advice and demonstration** for land managers as current provision is inadequate, expensive and not independent of agri-businesses
- **reference to addressing climate and nature emergency impact in the Food Security Review clause 17**
- **targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and pesticide impacts**
- **a measure to protect local authority owned 'Smallholdings estates' (County farms)**

The Sustain alliance's work on healthy and sustainable [farming policy](#) is part of our [Farming and Food Campaign](#) and sits in our [Campaign for a Better Food Britain](#),

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³ This could reduce the financial burden in the NHS: obesity costs the NHS in England more than £6bn per year, and is forecast to reach £10bn by 2050 see our longer briefing https://www.sustainweb.org/foodandfarmingpolicy/agriculture_bill/