

OF&G Discussion Paper

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Organic control body calls for 'land sharing' approach to halt economic and ecological collapse

The largest certifier of UK organic land, OF&G (Organic Farmers & Growers) is calling on the Government and agricultural industry to support policies that protect the land and rural communities across the country

Farm businesses face increasing financial pressure as gross margins are constricted by market economics. Threats to biological diversity and extreme weather events are taking their toll, leading to crucial debate around the best way to manage the countryside, tackle climate change and produce sustainable food supplies.

OF&G believes government policy must focus on 'land sharing' rather than 'land sparing' as a solution to our future agricultural production needs.

"Land sparing seeks to intensify production on higher quality agricultural land while lower quality land is 'spared' for nature," says Roger Kerr, chief executive at OF&G. "The thinking behind this approach is that any agricultural production negatively impacts wildlife, so there needs to be a greater separation of the two.

"Recently, Professor Sir Ian Boyd made a pronouncement suggesting half of UK agricultural land is reverted to natural habitats. This kind of bold thinking should be applauded but suggesting that the resultant lost agricultural production could be made up by vertical farms seems to miss the point. Vertical farms will be even more heavily reliant on external inputs for them to work than existing intensive agricultural systems.

"The land sparing model is also predicated on achieving much higher yields on the land remaining in agricultural production. However, current plant technology has only delivered small incremental yield increases at best in recent years and genetic modification (GM) technology has yet to deliver yield increases.

"The land sparing approach also doesn't address the continued soil degradation seen in intensive farming systems nor the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions attributed to ammonium nitrate production."

Like other business models, Mr Kerr says the industry needs to consider its financial principles in terms of the whole balance sheet, including wider natural assets and liabilities, rather than traditional, financial profit and loss.

"Land sharing comprises integrating agricultural production with more environmentally friendly techniques, bringing

nature into the field rather than displacing it somewhere else. Agro-ecological and organic farming techniques and interrelated activities across the food supply network seek to simultaneously deliver multiple environmental benefits.

"Stacking a diverse range of benefits in this way is proven to be far more resilient in the face of both climatic and economic shocks than intensive mono-cropping that remains reliant on energy intensive and costly inputs."

However, Mr Kerr says the Government appears to favour the direction of land sparing for agricultural policy without fully considering the medium- to long-term challenges and issues it would create. "We're facing significant challenges and land sparing is simply a reworking of 'business as usual' - something that is recognised as no longer an option."

Over the last 70 years, there has been limited investment in research and development (R&D) in agro-ecological farming practices and organic currently receives just 2-3% of funding compared to the rest of the agricultural sector.

Mr Kerr says more research funding for organic production techniques would provide scope to tailor approaches to improve and optimise yield, producing good quality food as well as protecting the natural environment and realising ecologically rich landscapes.

"Research would provide more insight into soil ecosystems and their relationship with plants, crop varieties best suited to organic farming, improved methods of pest and disease control, and it could reduce the need for antibiotic use in livestock.

"Through organic approaches, we can make meaningful changes to the environment as well as create a sustainable food production future. For example, in 2017 alone, UK organic crops grown without synthetic inputs resulted in 300t less pesticide active ingredients and 40,000t less fertiliser being used. This reduced need for fossil fuel based inputs and resultant reduction in field operations significantly decreases GHG emissions," Mr Kerr concludes.



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