

Soil Association Action Plan for Sustainable Farming

'I think we need to sit down with the industry and really work out what is the basis on which we want sustainable farming for the long-term.'

Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, Prime Minister, 1 March 2001.

For over fifty years agricultural policy in Britain has headed in one, unrelenting, direction. The drive to encourage ever greater and cheaper food production has led to the development of largely unsustainable farming practices to the detriment of environmental, human and animal health.

That's why the Soil Association welcomes the Prime Minister's recent statement. We believe that organic farming, the best example of sustainable agriculture, is the key to regenerating the rural economy. Not just for the production of safe and healthy food but also for increased employment, a better environment and improved human health.

The Soil Association wants to be involved in the debate over the future of farming and our countryside. As a first step we are publishing the following Action Plan For Sustainable Farming.

We need policy reform

- ?? Through a Government backed Action Plan for Organic Farming that will deliver planned and consistent growth in the amount of land being farmed organically
- ?? An organic stewardship scheme to encourage farmers who want to convert to organic production including post-conversion financial support
- ?? Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), moving funds from production based subsidies in favour of systems of farming that benefit the environment
- ?? The reopening of small and medium-sized abattoirs, the closure of which has been a key factor in the spread of Foot and Mouth

We need action on health

- ?? A new "Health of the Nation" initiative between the departments of health, agriculture and the environment, linking farming practice and food production methods with the environment, food safety and, most importantly, human health
- ?? An immediate ban on antibiotics in animal husbandry, other than for essential medical use
- ?? Significant reduction in pesticide use in non-organic farming, to halt damage to health and the environment
- ?? A ban on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food and agriculture including an end to the field scale trials, based on the identified risks to human health and the environment

We need action on the environment

- ?? Support for sustainable farming practices that encourage greater abundance and diversity of micro-organisms, plants and natural wildlife
- ?? A "polluter pays" charge - recharging the environmental costs of intensive farming practices back to the industry eg the £120 million yearly costs of pesticides clean up.

We need action on education

- ?? Education in schools on the relationship between farming practices and food, the difference between whole and processed food, and how to cook nutritious meals from raw ingredients
- ?? Public education on the real costs of industrialised food production, including the hidden tax burden, and on how direct links between consumer and producer benefit the rural economy
- ?? Encouragement of school visits to organic demonstration farms as part of the national curriculum

We need action on local food

- ?? Support for initiatives such as farmers' markets and community supported agriculture which encourage thriving economies for locally produced food. These initiatives reduce food miles, cutting fuel and pollution costs, and make good food more affordable and accessible.
- ?? Plans for developing and supporting local and regional food initiatives, farm diversification, vocational training and market development in partnership with Regional Development Agencies
- ?? The adoption of plans by supermarkets for sourcing locally produced foods and a "fair price" policy agreed with farmers
- ?? Investment in local food economies by providing locally grown organic produce in schools and hospitals

We need action on rural employment

- ?? Tax incentives to encourage the development of local organic businesses

All of the above objectives would be fulfilled through widespread adoption of organic farming and development of local food economies. The Soil Association believes that this must be at the cornerstone of any policy to promote sustainable agriculture. Organic farming is a production system which avoids the use of artificial pesticides and fertilisers and is characterised by the use of management practices such as crop rotations to avoid weed, pest and disease problems. It has proven environmental benefits, is animal welfare friendly and increases rural employment. It is also strongly supported in the market place by consumers for whom there are perceived environmental and health benefits. Such consumer support means organic

conversion can provide an economic lifeline to thousands of non-organic producers.