



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

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Farming MP calls for impact assessment of farm policies on domestic food production

A prominent farming MP has called on Defra to publish a full impact assessment of its Environmental Land Management (ELM) and Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) policies, in the context of the government's Food Strategy commitment to maintain national food production at current levels.

Conservative MP for York Outer, Julian Sturdy, who is a member of the House of Commons EFRA Committee and also chairs the APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture, recently tabled a written Parliamentary Question to Defra, asking whether the department has conducted an impact assessment of the ELM and SFI schemes on farm-level production, national agricultural productivity, and domestic food self-sufficiency.

In an [article](#) for Science for Sustainable Agriculture, Mr Sturdy said it was important to understand the full implications of ELM and SFI options, such as paying farmers not to use approved insecticides, to reduce fertiliser use below optimum productivity levels, to plant wildflower meadows rather than food crops, and to take productive farmland out of production.

"I am concerned that the policy emphasis on lower-yield farming practices such as these will inevitably take its toll on our domestic food production capacity, and increase our dependence on imports," he said.

"I am equally concerned that other ELM policies which support the loss of productive farmland to 'landscape-scale recovery' schemes are not framed within a coherent land use strategy, or with a clear vision of how national food production will be maintained.

"Scarcely a week goes by without reports of new solar farm developments, or tenanted farms being taken back in hand by landowners for rewilding or tree-planting. How will all these factors impact our ability to feed ourselves?"

Disappointingly, however, Mr Sturdy noted that the [209 word response](#) from Defra did not provide details of an impact assessment, or even sources of evidence and data, to support the government's policy framework.

"The government's approach appears to be based on NGO-inspired greenwash and wishful thinking," commented Mr Sturdy.

"According to Defra, a reduction in overall farm output as a result of taking land out of production *'is likely to be offset by long term improvements in soil health and pollinator abundance, which will support increased yields'*. No doubt that's what the environmental NGOs who designed many of these SFI schemes would have us believe, but where are the facts, data, evidence for this?"

“Similarly, Defra’s suggestion that reducing the use of fertilisers or pesticides will lead to “*lower inputs and higher productivity*” is just magical thinking. The idea that our highly professional, well-equipped farmers are recreationally applying pesticides and fertilisers, and not already optimising their use to enhance productivity, is groundless, not to say patronising, particularly at recent input price levels.”

Mr Sturdy noted that the EU had conducted an impact assessment of its Farm to Fork Strategy, which includes measures to reduce pesticide and fertiliser use, and expand organic farming, suggesting an overall 13% drop in food production across the bloc. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine and drought-hit harvests in southern Europe, this prompted French President Emmanuel Macron to suggest that the Farm to Fork Strategy should be fundamentally reviewed, acknowledging that it was “based on a pre-Ukraine war world”.

Subsequent policy developments suggest that the EU’s flagship farm policy may indeed be unravelling, with recent decisions to renew EU approval of glyphosate for a further 10 years, to throw out the SUR directive targeting a 50% reduction in pesticide use, and to accelerate the deregulation of gene editing all pointing to a rebalancing of scientific evidence over ideology.

“The UK government, by contrast, has no such evidence base or impact assessment to consult,” noted Mr Sturdy. “Instead, Ministers appear to have adopted a ‘fingers crossed’ approach.”

“It is not enough to conduct ex-post assessments of UK food security once every three years, as set out in the Agriculture Act. By then, the trees may have been planted, the solar farms constructed, the tenanted farms rewilded, the farm infrastructure plans cancelled, and the R&D investments diverted elsewhere.

“That’s why I am urging Ministers to publish a full ex-ante impact assessment of ELM and SFI policies on agricultural productivity and domestic self-sufficiency in food. It is vital that we adopt a clear-sighted, evidence-based approach to the development and implementation of future farm policies. Otherwise, we may risk sleepwalking into a food crisis,” he said.

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Notes

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.

For further information contact:

Daniel Pearsall, Group Co-ordinator, APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture

E-mail: press@appg-agscience.org.uk

Tel: 07770 875455