



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

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Sustainability metrics key to improving farm-level productivity, says APPG chair

Julian Sturdy MP, chair of the APPG on Science & Technology in Agriculture, has called on the Government to embed data science and sustainability metrics – measuring the external impacts of farming per unit of food produced - at the heart of a policy agenda focused on securing the optimum balance between food production, resource use and environmental impact.

Writing in the introduction to the All-Party Group's 2018-19 Annual Report, just released, Mr Sturdy said British agriculture faced a period of unprecedented change and uncertainty.

“The devastating Covid-19 outbreak has provided a stark reminder that food is a basic human need. It is inconceivable that this crisis will not stimulate a renewed policy focus on food security and the importance of maintaining a productive and sustainable domestic farming industry as the first vital link in our food supply chain.

“The Government's Agriculture Bill seeks to balance new payments for public goods with incentives to improve farm-level productivity. But recent Government figures point a drop in UK agricultural productivity of more than 2%, signalling the scale and urgency of the challenge, and the importance of getting the policy balance right.

“It is 10 years since Sir John Beddington's Foresight report on food security urged the UK Government to take a lead in promoting 'sustainable intensification' in agriculture. But while the pressures on global food supply remain as critical as ever, little progress has been made at a UK level to define, measure or monitor sustainable intensification in practice.

“The UK has a unique opportunity to put sustainability metrics at the heart of a new policy agenda. Farming businesses already generate large amounts of data relating to input use, production and management, but no centralised system currently exists for industry-wide sharing or collation of data,” he said.

Mr Sturdy noted that a global, 10-year study presented to the Group during 2019 by leading conservation scientists at Cambridge University had challenged the popular notion that more extensive farming systems are always the most sustainable. In fact, their research suggested that high-yield, intensive farming may be the best way to feed the world sustainably.

“The scientists were equally clear that the only way to provide meaningful comparisons between different farming systems is to measure external impacts per unit of food produced, rather than per unit of area farmed. We don't currently do this on a systematic basis in the UK.”

“Access to metrics capable of objectively and consistently monitoring the balance between productivity, resource use and environmental impact will be essential to define the concept of 'sustainable intensification' in practice, to set targets, measure progress and develop

coherent R&D programmes. It will also provide the basis to understand and disseminate advice on best practice throughout the industry,” said Mr Sturdy.

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Notes to Editors

A copy of the APPGSTA Annual Report 2018-19 is available to download [here](#).

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.

As chair of the Group, Julian Sturdy MP wrote to Defra Secretary Rt Hon George Eustice MP on 7 May 2020 calling on the Government to support a targeted amendment to the Agriculture Bill, paving the way for the Secretary of State to consult on a simple change to the Environmental Protection Act which would set aside restrictive EU rules on precision breeding techniques and bring our domestic regulations into line with the regulatory stance of other countries around the world, such as the US, Argentina, Brazil, Australia and Japan.

A copy of the text of the letter is available [here](#)

A statement by the APPG is available [here](#)

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For further information contact:

Julian Sturdy MP

E-mail: julian.sturdy.mp@parliament.uk

Mob: 07836 692010

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

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

Mob: 07770 875455

Tel: 01557 820504