



December 2017

This is an update on the Soil Association's policy work on farming and related developments in Westminster and beyond.

BREXIT & FUTURE FARMING POLICY

Michael Gove's [speech on future farming policy](#) at the Oxford Farming Conference confirmed Defra's intention to replace basic payments with payments for environmental protection and other public goods from 2024. Read Helen's response [here](#). And our review of Gove at Oxford [here](#).

Gove also attended the Oxford Real Farming Conference where he did a [Q&A with Zac Goldsmith and took questions from the audience, during which organic farming came up a number of times](#), including when Goldsmith asked about bird declines and chemical usage and whether moving towards more organic production was an aspiration of the Government. Gove answered:

"I certainly think we should move towards a more sustainable method of agriculture. The organic movement has done amazing work, which has influenced farming overall. I think it's difficult to prescribe every farm should meet the wisely high standards that Soil Association and others require, before someone is badged as being full organic. But I think many more farmers would like to go down that road than are currently doing so – part of the responsibility I have is making sure that public money can help them through the transition period before they become fully organic."

This is a welcome acknowledgement that organic represents high standards of 'sustainable farming' and that public money must be available to help farmers convert to organic – a good first step!

Alongside colleagues in producer support and communications, Sustain, and the English Organic Forum, we were involved in several sessions at ORFC. Watch #ORFC18 highlights [here](#).

We have conducted a number of detailed **surveys of organic farmers across the UK** this month to identify what they think the priorities for future agricultural policy should be. The purpose of this is to help shape the Wildlife and Countryside Link/ Greener UK proposals for farming and land use policy, as well as the Soil Association's own work.

In Westminster an **early day motion was tabled on Brexit, Environment and Health (No.688)** it highlights a level of cross-party support to maintain high food and environmental standards outside the EU and to be protected from any future trade agreements. More on this [here](#).

ANIMAL WELFARE

Animal welfare was a big issue in Westminster in December, following the public outcry after an amendment to transfer the **EU animal sentience principle** into UK was narrowly voted down by MPs. Read Helen's comment piece [here](#). This highlights an **early day motion on Animal Sentience (No. 587)** about which supporters were asked to email their MPs.

A few weeks later, Defra announced a **new legislative vehicle for animal sentience**, the draft Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience) Bill. The Soil Association's comment welcoming this is available [here](#). The new legislation is out for consultation until 31 January. Soil Association will be submitting a response. Individuals can also respond. Details of the consultation are [here](#).

The Select Committee for Environment Food and Rural Affairs is **conducting pre-legislative scrutiny on this Bill**. The policy team will be coordinating the Soil Association's response to be submitted by 17 January—please contact Sam to contribute. Details [here](#).

This coincided with Zac Goldsmith MP securing a Westminster Hall debate on his proposals for a new comprehensive Animal Welfare Bill. [His speech](#) highlighted two Soil Association priorities: using **public procurement** to drive up animal welfare standards (Food for Life gold standard schools in Richmond were highlighted) and “tackling the overuse and abuse of **antibiotics on farms**”.

SOIL

Following on from the Defra [announcement](#) of **mandatory 5 year testing of farm soils** for water management, we've been emphasising the need for measurement of soil organic matter to be included in this testing. Helen has written to Farming Minister George Eustice on this and we've highlighted this omission in a new blog published on World Soils Day, [here](#).

40 UK soil scientists recommended that **building soil organic matter** is a future farm subsidy priority with a combined letter to the government. This appeared on Farming Today, and in The Times [here](#).

The [Sustainable Soils Alliance](#) held a **meeting with agriculture minister George Eustice**. Soil Association is a lead partner in this alliance, and the policy team fed into the discussion.

PESTICIDES / FERTILISERS

We have submitted written evidence to a joint Select Committee inquiry into air quality, focussing on agricultural emissions. The **environmental impact of synthetic fertilisers in industrial farming** is becoming more widely recognised. This month, papers identifying the impact of nitrogen fertilisers on wildflowers and on reducing soil organic matter surfaced, but few link it to air pollution. You can read our blog and written evidence [here](#).

EU Member states were poised to decide on a **neonicotinoid ban** on 12 and 13 December, but the vote was delayed until February. Regardless of the outcome, Defra have committed to maintaining the ban in the UK, and Peter Melchett highlighted the weight of evidence behind a neonicotinoid ban in a new blog [here](#).

We attended a workshop for the **Defra Pollinator Advisory Steering Group**, putting the role of organic farming into the mix of future pollinator action, practices and policies. The importance of such approaches was highlighted by [new research](#), which found that fungicides are the strongest factor linked to steep bumblebee declines.

The issue of **toxic pesticide cocktails** remained high on the public agenda, with calls for pesticides to be

tested as rigorously as pharmaceuticals before they are released for use, including through long term impact studies. Peter Melchett wrote a guest blog for the Royal Society for Public Health highlighting how public health professionals can no longer ignore farming practices, and reflecting on the recent Royal Society of Medicine conference on pesticides and public health. Read Peter's article [here](#). There's also a blog about the conference on the Soil Association website [here](#).

TRADE

We've published a new **briefing on top 10 food safety risks** from a transatlantic trade deal. Any future trade deal outside the EU raises the possibility of a number of threats without robust regulation to protect consumers and producers in the UK; our new briefing shows that these go further than chlorinated chicken and highlights concerns that the Government must address in trade policy. Read [more](#).

The EFRA Select Committee's **Brexit - Trade in Food** inquiry continues. The Soil Association submitted [written evidence](#). Most recently, oral evidence was given by [Sustain](#), and by [Gove and Eustice](#). Gove said that *"the Red Tractor scheme signifies a high level of animal welfare, but there is more that we can do in order to allow British consumers to make better-informed judgments about where food comes from"* and stated that *"the Cabinet has agreed that there should be no compromise on high animal welfare and environmental standards."* MPs questioned the influence of Defra compared to other Government departments. More on this inquiry [here](#) and on the Trade Democracy Campaign [here](#).

ANTIBIOTICS

After the launch of the Alliance to Save our Antibiotics supermarket league table on antibiotics in food products – December saw **3 major supermarkets publish data on antibiotic use** in their supply chains, a fantastic achievement. Read the details [here](#).

ORGANIC

Helen wrote to Farming Minister, George Eustice, following up a recent meeting, to highlight the benefits of organic agriculture and the need for **specific organic farming support schemes** for conversion and maintenance, in order to achieve a number of connected gains in a post-Brexit agricultural support system.

We've produced a short briefing summarising **the benefits of organic farming** and case for support. This is being finalised now and will be ready for widespread dissemination soon. In the meantime, you can access a copy [here](#). Gove's comments on at ORFC (see above) were a welcome first step – but we've got further to go to secure the strongest possible, political and policy support for organic farming alongside our other priorities.

At EU level, [IFOAM EU](#) has issued a response to the latest [EU Commission communication](#) on **reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy**. IFOAM EU state that current CAP reform proposals: *"fail to prioritise the expansion of sustainable farming systems, such as organic farming, which can help to lead the way towards an ambitious implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals by the both EU and Member States"* – reflecting many similar issues to those being debated in relation to the future of farming and land use policy in the UK.

OTHER ISSUES

Honor Eldridge appeared on Farming Today talking about **GM food and farming**. Listen [here](#).

We held another **Digging into Horticulture roundtable** on encouraging new entrants into UK horticulture. The report on this will be released in the next month.

We attended a Green Alliance event launching a report on using **Natural Infrastructure Schemes** to harness private sector finance to support sustainable agriculture in the Anglian basin to deliver 'slow clean water'. There was interest from attendees in exploring schemes with organic farmers too, and we raised the issue of pesticide pollution in water in the debate. Read the report [here](#).

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CONTACT THE TEAM

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We hope that you find the policy round-up useful.

Policy team contact details and main areas of focus are provided here - but please feel free to get in touch with any of us and we'll do our best to help.

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