Daniel Zeichner MP

Minister of State at Defra

Marsham Street

London

SW1A 0AA 16th December 2024

Dear Minister

**An Organic Action Plan for England**

As you set out your vision for the future of food and farming, we are writing to urge you to work with us and other major stakeholders to develop an Organic Action Plan for England. This should form a significant component of Defra’s work with the farming sector to meet the challenges identified by Steve Reed when he set out his priorities for government, including food and nutritional security, restoring nature, reversing the dire state of our waterways, mitigating climate-induced flooding and moving to a zero-waste and circular economy.

The understandable push in the last century to maximise agricultural production at all costs has unintentionally exacerbated all of the above issues, and the food and farming system is also one of the major contributors to climate change. Yet there is plenty of evidence about the changes to the food and farming system that could have early benefits for each of these challenges, while also starting to address the diet-induced calamity facing the NHS that Wes Streeting has so starkly outlined.

A decisive shift to a more nature-friendly food and farming system will be essential to bring these changes about, and central to this shift will be growing the organic sector to meet the increasing demand from consumers for more sustainable and healthy food. We would therefore support an early commitment to an Organic Action Plan for England, to be developed with farming and environmental stakeholders. Experience from the previous Labour government’s Organic Action Plan, announced in 2002, highlights the role such a framework can play in boosting the sector: the targets set out in the plan led to a peak in organic farmland in England in 2008. Since then, it has decreased by around 30%,[[1]](#footnote-2) partly due to policy failings of subsequent governments. A new plan is urgently needed to support the growth of the sector moving forwards.

As well as the benefits to Defra’s priorities identified above, this would ensure that the UK economy, employment, and environment all gain from the expansion in organic food and farming currently being seen across the EU, rather than offshoring these benefits to our neighbours. It is worth noting that both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have ambitious plans for organic expansion, risking England becoming an outlier within the UK and Ireland.

The attached briefing details more of the clear evidence that organic production can support biodiversity, our waterways, soil health, climate adaptation, pesticide reduction, a circular approach to nutrients and better animal welfare. In a somewhat confusing picture of sustainability claims in farming, organic certification offers farmers, consumers and government certainty about the practices deployed and the benefits delivered. An Organic Action Plan for England designed to achieve a sustained and sustainable increase in organic production and consumption, with **a target for expansion to 10% of the farmed landscape**, will ensure early progress on the priorities you have identified, and we would welcome a meeting with you and your officials to discuss how this can be brought about.

Yours undersigned

Helen Browning, CEO, **Soil Association**

Richard Benwell, Chief Executive, **Wildlife and Countryside Link**

Joan Edwards OBE,Director Policy and Public Affairs, **The Wildlife Trusts**

Harry Bowell, Director of Land & Nature, **National Trust**

Glen Tarman, Director of Policy and Advocacy, **Sustain**

Anthony Field, Head of **Compassion in World Farming UK**

Tim Coleshaw, Chair, **British Dragonfly Society**

Kit Stoner, Chief Executive, **Bat Conservation Trust**

Bill Young, Chief Executive, **Organic Farmers & Growers**

Craig Macadam, Conservation Director, **Buglife**

James Wallace, CEO, **River Action**

Kyle Lischak, Head of UK, **ClientEarth**

Michael Copleston, England Director, **RSPB**

Doug Parr, Chief Scientist and Policy Director, **Greenpeace UK**

1. Defra Organic farming statistics (2022). Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/organic-farming-statistics-2022/organic-farming-statistics-2022> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)