

The Institution of Environmental Sciences

The professional body for environmental scientists
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POLICY COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF FARMING AND FOOD

A Response by the Institution of Environmental Sciences

The Institution welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper. The range of the issues involved is extremely wide, expanding to embrace the totality of rural planning policies and developments. In the time available, an in-depth and considered response on all subject areas is not practicable and we would therefore wish to direct attention to what we perceive as a number of critical areas. We trust, however, that opportunity will be afforded for further comment on any developing policy arising from the Commission's work.

In terms of overall farming and food supply policy, we believe that the UK should be self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs and 'buy British' should be an underlying theme. Free market competition has had a damaging effect on the farming industry and hence the rural economy and food standards have fallen. We also believe that 'small is beautiful' and the present move towards organic farming is to be encouraged. This helps the smaller enterprises and should improve quality. The manipulation of economic forces to achieve such ends may be difficult but a move that is necessary.

We do not rule out the use of GM technology to improve production levels but new systems should only be introduced after thorough trials and careful assessment of the benefits (and potential dangers). Traditional farming methods need more careful control to reduce over spraying of insecticides and other soil treatments to levels that allow a proper ecological balance. Effects on water tables (hence water supplies) and biodiversity must be stabilised. Achieving a proper balance needs a great deal of further investigation, research and trials.

The present dominance of the food chain supply by the larger retail organisations through supermarkets and hypermarkets has created a number of problems both for the consumer and the rural economy.

Mass produced foodstuffs now contain innumerable additives that are of no benefit to healthy eating and there is a preoccupation with price to the exclusion of quality. Genuinely fresh produce is becoming scarcer. Buying is centralised and the buying policies of the major corporations dictate both the growing policies of the farmers and the purchasing opportunities of the customer. Small retail food businesses in many rural areas are being put out of business to the detriment of the local communities. A reversal of this trend is to be encouraged by whatever means available.

It is worth noting that this buying policy contributes to the alarmingly high incidence of livestock movement about the country – a major factor in the recent foot and mouth epidemic. The large volumes of traffic generated are also harmful to the environment in other ways creating more road traffic movements, congestion and air pollution. Smaller local abattoirs have had to close. Local sale, processing and distribution should be re-established (albeit a somewhat difficult process now) thereby helping rural economies.

Finally, there needs to be a comprehensive and co-ordinated countryside policy, probably led by DEFRA and the Environment Agency, which encourages public participation through national and local organisations – the stakeholders. Good environmental planning systems are required which address biodiversity, landscape ecology and amenity alongside the economic pressures of food production policy, farming methods and rural employment.

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