



WORKING
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SUSTAINABLE
FOOD



**FOOD
ETHICS
COUNCIL**

SUMMARY

UK

2011

Conservation

Climate Change

Sustainability

A Square Meal

How encouraging greener eating fits the UK government's ambitions for the environment, farming and the Big Society

A discussion paper by WWF-UK and the Food Ethics Council

About WWF-UK

WWF is the world's leading independent conservation organisation. And we're tackling the most serious conservation challenges facing the planet, building a future where people and nature thrive together.

That's why we're passionate about sharing the planet's resources more sustainably, taking action on climate change and protecting endangered wildlife.

In January 2009, we launched our One Planet Food programme, which aims to work collaboratively with other key stakeholders to reduce the environmental and social impacts of UK food consumption, and to begin building a sustainable food system that can help people and nature thrive using their fair share of the planet's natural resources.

For further information on the work of the One Planet Food programme visit our website: wwf.org.uk/food

About the Food Ethics Council

The Food Ethics Council provides independent advice on the ethics of food and farming. We:

- help guide the way through difficult issues by analysing problems, challenging accepted opinion and creating a space for dialogue; and
- build tools to put ethics at the heart of decisions about food in business, policy and civil society.

Our Council members include bioethicists and moral philosophers, farmers and food industry executives, scientists and sociologists, academics and authors. Our work has covered topics including the personalisation of public health, the control of food research, the use of veterinary drugs and the growing challenge of water scarcity.

Find out more about our work, including the members of the Council, our Business Forum, and our must-read magazine, Food Ethics, on our website at www.foodethicscouncil.org

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INTRODUCTION

The coalition government has pledged to be the ‘greenest government ever’, and has made it clear that this ambition extends to our food. Yet, like its predecessor, it has been cautious about what sustainability means for British eating habits and, in particular, whether our appetite for meat can be reconciled with long-term targets to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

With the Committee on Climate Change and Foresight now making the case for consuming food more sustainably, this challenge will not go away. However, addressing it threatens to hurt the farming industry when it is already squeezed by high input costs and cheap competition. And it smacks of telling people what to eat.

Working with the food and farming industries, the government is taking welcome steps to reduce the sector’s environmental footprint.



WWF-UK and the Food Ethics Council have been working with the farming industry and environmental groups, in the UK and other countries, to try and find a way through this issue. This paper explores how the government can play its part in enabling consumers to eat more sustainably in ways that will help farming to thrive and respect people’s freedom to eat what they like. We focus on measures that fit the government’s priorities on the environment, farming and the Big Society. While the coalition can take most of the steps we propose without breaking stride, they must be underpinned by a clear commitment to encourage greener eating.

“The Greenhouse Gas Action Plan for agriculture shows the industry’s commitment to tackling climate change. Crucially, we need to make sure the UK’s lead in raising standards doesn’t just push up costs for farmers and ‘export’ our emissions to other parts of the world. I welcome this contribution by WWF-UK and the Food Ethics Council, which explores whether enabling consumers to choose more sustainable diets could help address this challenge”

Tom Hind,
director of corporate affairs,
National Farmers Union

RECOMMENDATIONS



- 1.** Extend international leadership on climate change by seeking the CCC's advice on consumption-related emissions and pursuing its recommendations through the UNFCCC.
- 2.** Draw on UK technical expertise to coordinate research and develop common footprinting protocols to support demand-side mitigation measures.



- 3.** Implement the Groceries Code Adjudicator to police the new Groceries Supply Code of Practice, intended to stamp out abuses in supply chain power.
- 4.** Investigate further whether the structure of food supply chains is sustainable.
- 5.** Clarify country-of-origin labelling, including for processed meat products, to complement voluntary and regulatory initiatives to raise domestic production standards.



- 6.** Ensure policies relating to food and farming promote efficient investment in the context of future constraints on land use and non-renewable resources.
- 7.** In promoting reform of the CAP, introduce one-off capital investment grants to encourage the rapid innovation of farming systems that can flourish under sustainable consumption scenarios.
- 8.** Convene and coordinate industry and campaigners in initiatives to promote better domestic carcass utilisation, to create higher value markets for the whole animal.



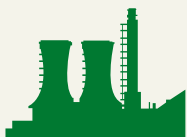
- 9.** Further develop the Government Buying Standards to require that menu cycles are analysed to meet sustainability standards.
- 10.** Provide the strategic basis for rational menu planning by following a recommendation of the Foresight report to develop and apply an 'effective, climate resistant' land use strategy.
- 11.** Use the Livewell Plate as a basis for updating official food advice.
- 12.** Take a lead in further refining existing definitions of a sustainable diet, convening a process open to all stakeholders, including retailers, farmers, civil society, communities and civil servants.



- 13.** Strengthen the consumer interest case for voluntary agreements that promote sustainable food supply chains by stating that promoting sustainable diets is a national policy objective.
- 14.** Convene a meeting involving supermarkets, ministers, senior officials from the OFT and other relevant stakeholders to develop a responsibility deal on sustainable food consumption.
- 15.** Promote Short Form Opinions, whereby the OFT can advise businesses on the legality of collaborative agreements.
- 16.** In creating a new UK Consumer and Markets Authority, merging the OFT and the Competition Commission, ensure that sustainability and health considerations are formally recognised in the implementation of competition policy.

THE GREENEST GOVERNMENT

On taking office, David Cameron promised that the coalition would become “the greenest government ever”.ⁱ The goal is to mainstream sustainable development across government, setting the UK on the path to a greener economy.



THE UK GOVERNMENT
HAS SHOWN GLOBAL
LEADERSHIP ON
CLIMATE CHANGE BY
SETTING TARGETS TO
REDUCE GREENHOUSE
GAS EMISSIONS
50% BY 2025 AND
80% BY 2050

Leading the international climate agenda

The UK government has shown global leadership on climate change by setting targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 50% by 2025 and 80% by 2050. UK and international rules on emissions require us to apply standards to the products we export, but not to those we import. Since the UK has stricter targets for reducing emissions than other countries, this could put UK businesses at a disadvantage by ‘off-shoring’ production.

Off-shoring is a global problem: while emissions associated with production have been falling in the rich countries committed to reporting and reductions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), increases in consumption within those countries, met mainly by imports from China, India and Brazil, have contributed to an overall increase in global emissions.ⁱⁱ The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) highlighted this challenge in the fourth carbon budget.ⁱⁱⁱ

Valuing the natural environment

The government’s Natural Environment White Paper recognises that we can no longer afford the costs to our economy and quality of life that arise from a degraded natural environment.^{iv} For example, the annual cost of soil erosion in the UK is estimated at £40 million, while insect pollinators are estimated to contribute around £440 million a year to the UK economy.^v

Valuing ecosystem services more accurately in the economy would help to align prices and consumption patterns more closely with environmental impacts, by raising the cost of relatively resource-intensive activities. However, a particular issue in the food sector, including in meat supply chains, is whether producers are in a strong enough bargaining position to pass higher environmental costs on to retailers and consumers, and so influence their behaviour.



**THE GOVERNMENT
HAS SAID THAT IT
IS COMMITTED TO
BUYING FOOD THAT
MEETS THE UK
FARMING INDUSTRY'S
STANDARDS^{vii}**

Raising government buying standards

Historically, the fact that the government has not been buying sustainable food for its own catering has hindered efforts to encourage greener eating – missing an opportunity for market leverage, and sending the public a mixed message. The new Government Buying Standards (GBS) for food procurement, centred on sustainability and nutrition, are a welcome step in correcting this.^{vii}

The present GBS include a best practice standard that “menu cycles are analysed to meet stated nutrient based standards”, which could be developed to incorporate sustainability standards. Modelling for the Committee on Climate Change suggests that reducing consumption of meat – particularly red meat – could achieve very substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, while complementing nutritional advice.^{ix} However, the sustainability of individual food consumption practices depends on current and projected patterns of land use across the UK, for example the balance between forest, pasture and arable land.

Recommendations

Extend international leadership on climate change by seeking the CCC's advice on consumption-related emissions and pursuing its recommendations through the UNFCCC.

Draw on UK technical expertise to coordinate research and develop common footprinting protocols to support demand-side mitigation measures.

Implement the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) to police the new Groceries Supply Code of Practice, intended to stamp out abuses in supply chain power.

Investigate further whether the structure of food supply chains is sustainable.

Further develop the GBS to require that menu cycles are analysed to meet sustainability standards.

Provide the strategic basis for rational menu planning by following a recommendation of the Foresight report to develop and apply an ‘effective, climate resistant’ land use strategy.^x

A PRODUCTIVE COUNTRYSIDE



THE GOVERNMENT
WANTS “TO
SUPPORT BRITISH
FARMERS SO THEY
CAN CONTINUE
TO DELIVER THE
BEST PRODUCE
SUSTAINABLY”^{xi}

Eating less meat on sustainability grounds would be compatible with more profitable farming if a larger share of the meat consumed in the UK were produced here; UK producers exported more; and farmers received a higher return for their meat or for other farming activities that substitute for income lost from meat production.

Campaigning for clear country-of-origin labels

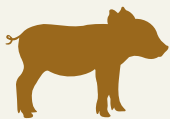
By clarifying country-of-origin labelling, the government has sought to ensure that consumers can reward British farmers for investing in higher production standards.^{xii} This call for ‘honest labels’ has been supported by the food and drink industry which, with Defra, has developed voluntary principles on country-of-origin information for meat and dairy products.^{xiii}

This may help to address concerns that UK welfare standards are undercut by overseas competition, particularly for processed meat products. While country of origin is not a proxy for environmental performance, clarifying labelling places an onus on British farmers to improve quality, sustainability and animal welfare standards ahead of the competition – to continually justify consumers’ trust and preference for buying British.

Ensuring a fair and competitive market

The government could help supermarkets develop their producer groups to support sustainable consumption and production. In principle, such groups allow retailers to ensure that participating farmers would receive a viable return and be able to invest in sustainable production, *even if* overall consumption were falling because of companies ‘choice editing’ to encourage sustainable consumption.

However, sustainable consumption initiatives of this sort present a first mover disadvantage. In practice, producer groups can only play a part in raising consumer prices to reflect environmental costs, or in eliminating the least sustainable products, if supermarkets are allowed to collaborate with each other. Such collaboration poses competition regulators with a dilemma: to protect the long-term



LIKE CHANGES IN
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CAPITAL
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PRODUCTION ARE
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MONTHS

consumer interest in sustainability, or the short-term interest in choice and low prices. Retailers are nervous about collaborating because their previous attempt to ensure a higher return for dairy farmers was penalised by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT).^{xiv}

Enabling sustainable investment

The freedom that meat producers have to achieve reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and make other environmental improvements, and to remain profitable in scenarios where people were to eat more sustainably, is shaped by the capital they have invested in animal housing and processing infrastructure. Like changes in consumption, capital investments in livestock production are made over a timescale of decades rather than years or months. In looking forward to a profitable and sustainable future for farming, the government should seek to ensure that its influences on investment in the industry create opportunities to promote sustainable consumption rather than locking businesses and consumers into unsustainable practices.

Recommendations

Clarify country-of-origin labelling, including for processed meat products, to complement voluntary and regulatory initiatives to raise domestic production standards.

Strengthen the consumer interest case for voluntary agreements that promote sustainable food supply chains by stating that promoting sustainable diets is a national policy objective.

Convene a meeting involving supermarkets, ministers, senior officials from the OFT and other relevant stakeholders to develop a responsibility deal on sustainable food consumption.

Ensure policies relating to food and farming promote efficient investment in the context of future constraints on land use and non-renewable resources.

In promoting reform of the CAP, introduce one-off capital investment grants to encourage the rapid innovation of farming systems that can flourish under sustainable consumption scenarios.

SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR IN THE BIG SOCIETY

Understanding society's attitudes and behaviour towards sustainable consumption is integral to the government's commitment to freedom, fairness and responsibility.^{xv} Opportunities for the government to enable civil society and business to encourage sustainable consumption lie in improving and simplifying government advice about food, reducing waste and lifting the barriers to businesses doing more choice editing.



**IT IS THE
GOVERNMENT'S
JOB TO MAKE IT
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PRODUCTS THAT ARE
PRODUCED MORE
SUSTAINABLY**

Simplifying government advice

When it comes to sustainable food consumption, the message from Defra is clear: it is the government's job, working in partnership with others, to make it easy for people to purchase food products that are produced more sustainably.^{xvii} A crucial opportunity to do so lies in simplifying the advice that the government already provides to consumers about food – combining information on healthy eating and sustainability.

The Livewell Plate, developed by WWF-UK and the Rowett Institute, takes a first step in addressing this need.^{xviii} Based on the Food Standards Agency's 'Eatwell plate', it proposes a weekly menu that's good for both human health and the planet. It promotes the simple principles of eating more fruit, vegetables and cereals, but less meat and fewer highly-processed foods.

64%

Of the 8.3 million tonnes of food wasted by households each year, 5.3 million (or 64%) are avoidable.

Cutting waste out of the system

A strong consensus has emerged over the need to reduce the 16 million tonnes of food and drink currently wasted in the UK each year.^{xix} The total emissions associated with this avoidable food waste are estimated at 20 MtCO₂e, of which 6.5 MtCO₂e are attributable to UK agricultural emissions from soils and livestock.^{xx} The objective of reducing this waste is shared by government, civil society, and the food and farming industries.

The effect on food and farming businesses of reducing household food waste would be a reduced demand for their products.



**CONSUMERS WANT
AND EXPECT THE
BRANDS THAT THEY
TRUST TO ENSURE
THE PRODUCTS
ON SALE ARE
SUSTAINABLE**

This is comparable to the effect of making changes towards healthier and more sustainable eating patterns. We invite producers and the government to see unsustainable food consumption in the same terms as food waste, and to see addressing that as another way to encourage consumers to respect the full value of farmers' work and products. An opportunity to bridge these two issues – similar, yet perceived so differently – lies in initiatives to encourage the consumption of less popular meat cuts.

Lifting barriers to sustainable business

The government can also play a crucial role in reducing the barriers that businesses face in choice editing. Research for the IGD found that 80% of consumers are comfortable with ethical choice editing.^{xxi} As outlined above, however, efforts by retailers to create a framework for consumer choice that's consistent with the broader public interest can run up against competition law. The government can work with the OFT and consumer groups to develop publicly-accountable mechanisms whereby businesses can collaborate to make progress on sustainability in the public interest.

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"We're not going to get people to cut every aspect of their consumption. But I believe it is realistic to change the culture of consumption..." xvi

David Cameron

Recommendations

Use the Livewell Plate as a basis for updating official food advice.

Take a lead in further refining existing definitions of a sustainable diet, convening a process open to all stakeholders, including retailers, farmers, civil society, communities and civil servants.

Convene and coordinate industry and campaigners in initiatives to promote better domestic carcass utilisation, to create higher value markets for the whole animal.

Promote Short Form Opinions, whereby the OFT can advise businesses on the legality of collaborative agreements.

In creating a new UK Consumer and Markets Authority, merging the OFT and the Competition Commission, ensure that sustainability and health considerations are formally recognised in the implementation of competition policy.

WE WILL IF YOU WILL

The work that WWF-UK and the Food Ethics Council have been doing with producer organisations has found that the government has a mandate from business to play an active role in helping to negotiate the environmental, social, economic and animal welfare issues relating to the consumption of food, including meat.^{xxii} Government-funded public and consumer research has found that it also has permission to do so from citizens.^{xxiii}

In both cases, however, that mandate is conditional. Businesses will support government interventions that are fair, based on solid evidence and sensitive to the practical complexities of their industry. The public will only accept changes if the government also does its bit: the overwhelming message is 'we will if you will'.^{xxiv}





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This is a summary of a discussion paper available
at wwf.org.uk/squaremeal

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100%
RECYCLED

Sustainable diets in numbers

20%

The rise in UK consumption-related greenhouse gas emissions since 1990

30%

The proportion of UK greenhouse gas emissions generated by the food sector



1 BILLION

The number of people worldwide suffering from hunger and malnutrition. The same number are overweight or obese

£440 MILLION

The estimated annual contribution of insect pollinators to the UK economy

48%

Proportion of greenhouse gas emissions from the UK diet arising from meat dishes



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

wwf.org.uk