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PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

WWF Briefing for Opposition Day debate on Food

23 January 2012

This WWF Parliamentary Briefing has been prepared ahead of the Opposition Day debate on rising food prices and food poverty on 23 January 2012. This briefing covers sustainability, health and diet, and the UK government's role in fixing the food system.

Summary

- **Rising food prices must be seen in the context of the global food system. WWF promotes sustainability across the global food chain from farm to fork.**
- **The long-term trend of low food prices is ending. The UK Foresight Report predicts a 'perfect storm' of growing pressures on water, energy and land threatening global food security and raising prices.**
- **Our food system must be underpinned by protection of our natural environment and prevention of climate change.**
- **Improvements and efficiencies in food production will not be enough. Our consumption patterns must change too.**
- **Businesses, civil society and government all have roles to play in fixing our food system for a future where people and nature thrive.**
- **The government should prioritise a healthier, more sustainable, and affordable diet. This would be a win-win for health, society, and the environment.**

Introduction

Attention to affordable food is welcome, but we must consider the real cost of food not just for UK consumers but for our society, economy, environment and future generations. Food's true cost includes externalities which are not found in the price at the supermarket checkout.

Sustainability in the food system

In the UK, the food we eat – growing, producing and importing it – has a huge impact around the world. The food system is putting our planet's natural environment under stress from greenhouse gas emissions, water use, and deforestation. Globally, 30% of biodiversity loss is caused by agriculture. A sustainable food system must be underpinned by protection of our natural environment. We cannot talk about global food security without sustainability.



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The UK food system from farm to fork must play its part in meeting the UK emissions reduction target of -80% by 2050. Currently 20% of UK direct emissions come from food and agriculture, rising to 30% when we include indirect emissions such as land use change.¹ Yet current plans in English agriculture will not meet even the -6% on 2008 levels set out in the Low Carbon Transition Plan 2009, a target the Climate Change Committee already says is too low.²

WWF recommends more ambitious targets when the voluntary GHG Action Plan is reviewed later this year, with incentives for bolder action and policies to overcome barriers to investment.

Sustainable levels of consumption

Improvements and efficiencies in food production will not be enough to meet our 2050 target. Our patterns of food consumption must become more sustainable too. This will require a ‘diet shift’ towards foods that are less energy-intensive: we must eat more fruits and vegetables, and start to reduce our intake of meat, dairy and processed foods. Such society-wide behaviour change needs long-term policy efforts from businesses and civil society led by government.

WWF recommends that the government commits to cut GHG consumption-based emissions from the food supply chain by at least 25% by 2020, and at least 70% by 2050, supported by the development of a GHG route map. Furthermore, the government must accept that they have a mandate to address consumption of energy-intensive foods (meat, dairy, and processed foods) and commit to a target of 20% reduction from 2005 levels by 2020.

A healthy and sustainable diet

The current UK diet damages our health, our environment, and has obvious costs to the economy. We face a health crisis – in obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancers – that is closely related to unhealthy diet and lifestyles. According to the NHS, 61.3% of the UK’s population is overweight or obese, with direct costs estimated to be £4.2 billion and rising. There are also wider costs. For example, estimated weight problems already cost the wider economy in the region of £16 billion, rising to £50 billion/year by 2050 if left unchecked.³

But there is a win-win here: what is better for our health is also better for the planet. WWF’s Livewell Plate – developed in partnership with the Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health, and based on the NHS Eatwell Plate – combines sustainability with healthy eating advice and provides guidelines to improve our diet.⁴ Livewell offers easy, flexible guidelines to help people enjoy healthier, more sustainable food.⁵ The resulting weekly shopping basket is also *cheaper* than the average, which has a high proportion of expensive processed foods and meat.

WWF recommends the UK government should promote sustainable diets as a national policy objective and integrate sustainability criteria into healthy eating advice along Livewell lines.

UK Government's role

The government needs a food strategy. The Foresight report noted the critical importance of joined-up policy-making. This food strategy should be cross-departmental, led by Cabinet Office, examine the food chain holistically and globally, and address both food production and consumption, so that our future food system can be sustainable, healthy and affordable for all.

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¹ [WWF - How low can we go? \(2008\)](#)

² [Committee on Climate Change - Meeting Carbon Budgets \(2011\)](#) p.142

³ [Department of Health - Obesity: General Information](#)

⁴ [WWF - Livewell: a balance of healthy and sustainable food choices \(2011\)](#)

⁵ http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/food_campaign/livewell_2020