

News Release 015 - Jo'burg World Summit on Food and Agriculture

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Sustainable
Development Commission

From Johannesburg to the Future of Rural Britain - Where Now for UK Farming?

Given the lack of action on agriculture at the Johannesburg Summit, Margaret Beckett must now seize the opportunity to set agriculture and food supply on a truly sustainable path without further delay. The Curry Report on the future of farming and food, set in the context of the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), has provided a once-in-a-decade opportunity to make sustainable development a reality in this critical economic sector.

According to Jonathon Porritt, Chairman of the Sustainable Development Commission, "this is a vital policy area, affecting the lives of all UK citizens, as well as a key sector of the UK economy. As is now almost universally acknowledged, current farming practices are seriously unsustainable – economically, socially and environmentally. And the problem is that the taxpayer is encouraging unsustainable production through current farm subsidies – here and in other countries."

Unfortunately, the World Summit on Sustainable Development has done nothing to accelerate the phase-out of European farm subsidies, despite condemnation from Africa and elsewhere. The Summit implementation plan takes us no further than the Doha conclusions of November 2001, which committed governments to negotiations with a view to phasing out all forms of export subsidies.

Porritt believes that "the Summit has achieved nothing of any significance or materiality on agriculture. Perverse subsidies lead to wasteful overproduction in Europe and harm farmers and their families in the developing world. European farm subsidies need urgent reform."

The Sustainable Development Commission agrees with the EU perspective that farmers provide vital benefits in terms of ensuring the prosperity of rural areas and boosting local economies. The Commission also agrees that farmers cannot protect the environment, maintain high standards of animal welfare and deliver affordable food without financial help.

"Market intervention needs to encourage rather than detract from sustainable agriculture. Farmers must be rewarded not for producing surpluses, but for protecting the environment, revitalising rural communities, raising standards on animal welfare and restoring biodiversity," says Porritt.

A seminar organised today by the Sustainable Development Commission explored some of the practical implications of putting sustainability at the heart of the food supply chain. The following recommendations emerged for those in DEFRA currently drafting the White Paper on sustainable agriculture:

1. The department must be crystal clear in defining what it means by sustainable agriculture and sustainable food production, as there is still enormous confusion amongst farmers as well as food processors and retailers.
2. As well as focussing on new measures to help protect the environment, the White Paper must take equal account of the importance of supporting local



- production for local markets, making links between local consumers and local producers.
3. Government health policy should focus on achieving a healthy population by addressing the availability of nutritious food for everyone. The NHS could set a lead through what they offer patients in hospitals.
 4. Large scale purchasers of food, including government departments and local authorities should provide a lead in supplying healthy food, produced in ways that respect sustainable development objectives. Procurement policy is going to be a vital element in securing more sustainable agricultural practices, but this has played little part as yet in DEFRA's deliberations on the White Paper.
 5. Through their approach to corporate social responsibility all companies buying food and commodities should make sure that they incorporate sustainable development requirements as part of their policies and practices. The Government can help by encouraging clear checklists and good practice in the business world.
 6. More thought needs to be given to ensuring that energy consumption is reduced throughout the food chain – especially where food and food products are transported by air when there are feasible sources of more local production. Farming can also help to lock up carbon in soils and woodlands – and deliver alternatives to fossil fuel.
 7. Government policy for education should ensure that children learn about sustainable food production, and see it demonstrated through school meals and snacks. School governing bodies should be encouraged to take a lead.

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- The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) is the Government's independent sustainable development advisor, reporting to Tony Blair and the devolved administration leaders. www.sd-commission.gov.uk
- SDC's remit is to advocate sustainable development across all sectors in the UK, review progress towards it, and build consensus on the actions needed for further progress. SDC is currently working in the areas of climate change, energy policy, food, health and agriculture, and regeneration.
- Sustainable development provides a framework for redirecting our economies to enable everyone to meet their basic needs and improve their quality of life, while ensuring that the natural resources upon which they depend are maintained and enhanced, both for their benefit and for that of future generations.