

AGRICULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY – OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVES

There are many government policy initiatives and many retailer-driven activities aiming for the agricultural sector to become more sustainable, and the number of these policies and activities is growing. Defra’s 25 Year Environment Plan is one of these. It requires food to be produced sustainably and also sets a number of environmental targets.

The Government has also stated its intention for UK to become net zero carbon by 2050. The BRC has stated its aim for its members to become net zero carbon by 2040 and some retailers are bringing this date forward. This places onus on the farming community to meet a number of sustainability indicators such as land use, chemical input, biodiversity waste, water and greenhouse gases (GHG). But there remains an important issue of measuring most of these indicators in a consistent way. The agricultural community needs tools necessary to respond to these challenges.

This document summarises initiatives currently underway in agricultural sustainability.

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1. Defra Land Management Schemes

There are three new Defra schemes that will reward environmental land management:

- Sustainable Farming Incentive
- Local Nature Recovery
- Landscape Recovery

These schemes are intended to support the rural economy while achieving the goals of the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) and a commitment to net zero emissions by 2050.

Through these schemes, farmers and other land managers may enter into agreements to be paid for delivering the following:

- clean and plentiful water
- clean air
- thriving plants and wildlife
- protection from environmental hazards
- reduction of and adaptation to climate change
- beauty, heritage and engagement with the environment

Further details are available on Defra 25 Year Environment Plan, link provided above.

2. Agricultural Industries Federation - AGRI-SUPPLY ROADMAP FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD CHAIN

This [roadmap](#) provides details on how the agricultural supply chain can meet the objectives of the Defra 25 Year Environment Plan, UN goals and achieving net zero status.

3. National Farmers Union (NFU)

NFU's Net Zero Environment Land Management project ([ELM Test & Trial](#)) found that farm GHG calculators are most useful to raise awareness of emissions and support decision making, and it is critical that skilled advice covering agriculture and climate change is available alongside. Barriers to the implementation of resulting net zero actions that need to be overcome include: low confidence, the costs and time required to implement changes and uncertainty caused by tenancy arrangements.

As a next step based on findings from the trial, NFU have proposed that a Net Zero Standard should be included as part of the Sustainable Farming Incentive (or other means) incentivising farmers to:

- Measure key metrics on farm using [AHDB's KPI Express Tool](#) and GHG footprinting (covering emissions and removals) as appropriate to the SFI levels for key products and enterprises across the farm business on an annual basis; and
- Use the information to develop a net zero plan (or incorporate net zero measures into other land management plans) and set targets as appropriate.

NFU has submitted a proposal to Defra for a Net Zero trial focused on the use of farm carbon calculators and their link to land management plans, advice and guidance specifically seeking to understand collectively how these can best drive behaviour change.

4. Defra-EA Rules on Water on Farms

Defra and the Environment Agency (EA) in March 2022 published new [guidance on the interpretation of the Farming Rules for Water](#) (FRfW) for farmers.

5. Global Farm Metrics (GFM)

The [GFM Research Tool](#) (UK) is an open-source self-assessment tool created to trial the GFM framework. It has been built to test whether this method of data capture and the outputs provided in the GFM Research Tool helps farmers and land managers to:

- Set and monitor progress towards sustainability goals
- Make incremental improvements to farming practices
- Learn about and reduce the negative impacts the farm may be having
- Improve the local environment
- Prepare for upcoming changes to the UK agricultural policy
- Save time inputting the same information into multiple assessments

6. WWF-Tesco Partnership

Two reports covering the capacity of agriculture to reduce emissions and sequester carbon were launched at the 2022 Oxford Farming conference:

- a) [Farm-level Interventions to Reduce Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Emissions](#)
- b) [The opportunities of agri-carbon markets: policy and practice](#)

The first, the [Report for the Sustainable Agriculture Workstream of the WWF-UK and Tesco Partnership was prepared by Eunomia Research Consulting](#) in association with Innovation for Agriculture, RAU and Reading University assesses interventions that UK farmers can implement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on their farms and provides advice to policymakers (and other key stakeholders) for how they can support uptake. Reducing food waste (that is not generated on farms) and encouraging dietary shifts away from animal products are recognised as key to reducing agricultural emissions.

Key recommendations were:

1. Develop more holistic GHG emissions accounting to understand priorities incorporating the climate impact of occupying land for UK agriculture (in the UK and overseas) to prioritise interventions that improve land-use efficiency and considering shorter-timescales when assessing global warming potential GWP to prioritise interventions that reduce methane.
2. Accelerate targeted research and development to deliver change where the potential impact is greatest:
 - a) Reducing methane via feed additives for ruminants
 - b) Reducing the land area required for animal feed production by using alternative protein sources (e.g. insects and microbial protein).
3. Improve support for farmers to reduce their GHG emissions:
 - a) Robust, impartial, consistent, and tailored advice, and
 - b) Financial incentives to fund both capital and ongoing costs.
4. Ensure open access to data to establish a central evidence base to support R&D and provide consistent advice for farmers.
5. Deliver system change to enable farmers to reduce on-farm food waste (as well as off-farm food waste and dietary shifts).

The second report reviews the scientific evidence on different interventions for sequestering carbon on working farms, and outline the challenges that need to be addressed in order for there to be a credible and sustainable market for agri-carbon.

7. UK Farm Soil Carbon Code - Sustainable Soils Alliance

The overarching aim of this work is to create a [code on soil carbon and soil carbon marketplaces](#) for the UK. This Sustainable Soils Alliance are also publishing a review of existing codes for soil carbon and relevant findings for UK businesses

8. Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) 10 Year Strategy

[LEAF in November 2020 launched a 10 Year strategy](#) that contains a plan to transform the farming and food systems through positive action for the climate, nature, the economy and society. This focuses on the following key areas:

- Delivering Climate Positive Solutions
- Creating Beacons of Excellence
- Measuring Impact and Harmonising Metrics
- Building Sustainable Food Chains
- Growing Education and Engaging Society
- Cultivating Sustainable Health and Wellbeing
- Building Connections
- Scaling up Our Reach

9. HESTIA Project

A [HESTIA project](#) undertaken by Cambridge University aims to set up a global platform to harmonise and share carbon factor data from different food systems.

10. Defra Farm GHG Calculation Tools Project

There are currently approximately 70 farm GHG calculation tools available. Not all give the same answers to the same query. DEFRA is conducting a project to review these tools to assess the main causes of variation and also make recommendations to harmonise these tools. The project will finish at the end of next year.

11. WRAP Scope 3 Accounting Principles

WRAP work on developing Scope 3 Accounting Principles is due to be published in May 2022. This will set out Scope 3 accounting methods and will also provide generic emission factors of some products that may be used given that accurate emissions level of most of the foods are not yet available.

12. AHDB Envirobench

The Board of Directors at AHDB have paused work on the development of [Envirobench](#) that was to provide a methodology for the calculation of different farm sustainability metrics.

13. IGD Environmental Labelling of Foods

IGD has formed a [group to develop a pragmatic environmental labelling of food](#) products to meet government aspirations to provide sustainability status of food products to help consumers choose environmentally friendly products. Biodiversity and GHG emissions are likely to be part of labelling.