



IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, WHAT ARE FARMERS DOING TO BE MORE RESILIENT?

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Issued jointly by: The Organic Research Centre (ORC), the Allerton Project of GWCT, LEAF, OF&G (Organic Farmers and Growers), the Soil Association and the Agricolgy Project

British farming businesses are facing a number of challenges, such as uncertain weather, volatile markets and a support structure. The Secretary of State for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, has set out ambitions for the UK to be a world-leading food and farming nation that provides a cleaner and healthier environment, benefiting the economy. A consortium of farming organisations has therefore come together to explore the extent to which the application of agroecological techniques, widely adopted in organic agriculture, can help to achieve these goals.

The Defra-funded project '**Opportunities, barriers and constraints in organic techniques helping to improve the sustainability of conventional farming**' has shown that the UK has an excellent opportunity to drive the uptake of practices that can enhance the production efficiency and resilience of farming systems. The project investigated the viability of transferring agroecological practices more widely across UK agriculture.

In total, 110 techniques* were identified and reviewed, whilst 15 practices were further evaluated for their potential to improve soil quality, nutrient use efficiency, water quality and biodiversity, use of artificial inputs and greenhouse gas efficiencies. These practices have been summarised in fact-sheets published by Agricolgy** for dissemination and engagement across a wide community of farmers.

Agroecological techniques are not exclusive to organic systems and are increasingly being applied by progressive farmers in the non-organic sector. For example, leys are being incorporated within conventional arable crop-rotations to help control blackgrass.

Phil Jarvis farms in Loddington, Leicestershire and is using several practices. He has integrated leys in the rotation, has moved to a no-till system using cover crops and is establishing a silvopastoral agroforestry system. He says: *"We need to look how we can transition from systems based on chemistry to systems based on biology – there are lots of things in nature that can help us. We may not get there as quick as we would like but need to be patient with it. We have to increase our knowledge and see what is best for the land on our own farms. It is not really learning anything new, just the fundamentals of agronomy and livestock husbandry and using that knowledge to increase production efficiencies and resilience"*

The outcomes of the stakeholder consultation indicated that a lack of information is a major factor limiting the current uptake of organic management techniques. There is a clear demand for applied research alongside practical training and advice to demonstrate the potential benefits of the management techniques considered here, and how they can be realised on farm. Individual practices studied as part of this project and effective combinations demonstrate the value of existing system-level approaches, such as organic farming, Integrated Farm Management and conservation agriculture.



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Council of Management: M. Turnbull (Chairman), V. Agrawal (Treasurer), A. Astor, T. Bennett, A. Blackshaw, D. Peck,
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Changing attitudes across the supply chain is also key to improve the uptake of sustainable practices within the farming sector. This requires active participation from multiple stakeholders, alongside the demonstration of best practice, improved on-farm advice and farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange.

Notes to editor:

Further details and full report of the project can be found on the Defra RandD website:

http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=14421_Final_report_OF03101_OF03111.pdf

And

<http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=20252#Description>

*The project consortium consists of

- Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust,
- SRUC,
- LEAF,
- Organic Research Centre,
- Organic Farmers & Growers,
- Soil Association, and
- Agricology

**The 110 organic techniques were reviewed and shortlisted by the project consortium through stakeholder consultation, data analysis, literature reviews, and using financial modelling to estimate the effect of individual practices. Face-to-face interviews and farmer workshops helped produce the shortlist of 15.

***Agricology (www.agricology.co.uk) is a free web-based knowledge exchange hub that promotes sustainable agriculture “regardless of labels.” It translates research into practical application through a growing community of farmers and researchers and a collaboration of over 25 of the UK’s leading organisations working with sustainable agriculture (including the project consortia). Agricology is primarily funded by the Daylesford Foundation.

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