

New report sheds light on how UK farming can meet the sustainability challenge

A new report commissioned by the Land Use Policy Group (LUPG) and funded by Scottish Natural Heritage has taken a unique approach to help UK farmers meet the sustainability challenge by using the experiences of farmers that have ‘redesigned’ their farming systems utilising natural resources, such as clover grass leys in the crop rotation, to secure a healthier future for the environment and their businesses.

Launched this week, the report was written by two leading UK farming research institutions; the Organic Research Centre and the GWCT’s Allerton Project. The aim was to investigate how the science of agroecology can play a central role in the way our green and pleasant land is managed in the future.

Analysing the practical experiences of a group of farmers from Scotland, England and Wales the report aims to unravel farmer expectations, risks and opportunities to help form future policy in the UK based on agroecological farming practices.

The group of fourteen farmers involved in the study were quite diverse and wide ranging – from small scale to large commercial enterprises with on-farm approaches covering agroforestry, pasture-fed livestock systems, organic and integrated farming with direct drilling and/or integration of livestock in arable operations.

Dr Susanne Padel from the Organic Research Centre and a co-author of the study said, “This is a time of great change and worry for farmers in the UK. Government is discussing how we rethink the way the countryside is managed to make sure we have a sustainable, profitable, farming industry post Brexit. Our report is therefore extremely timely and provides further insight on the experiences of a wide group of farmers. It adds to the debate on the practical implications of transitioning to agroecology and importantly, how this can be a potential way forward for other farmers.”

The case studies of those farmers involved in the research showed that transition is an active learning process. Generally, the farmers were seeking a long-term economic perspective on future-proofing their farms, for example through investment in the natural capital of soil and soil fertility as well as through premium prices from quality labels (such as organic farming or pasture-fed), direct marketing or engagement with supply chains as well as seeking cost-savings on inputs.

They also reported shifts in their understanding of farming (“change in mind-set, “weeds as forage” and “accepting mess”). Having started with some agroecological practices and seeing positive outcomes, the farmers then considered adopting others to ‘redesign’ their farming systems.

Susanne Padel adds, “Farmers who are environmentally aware, skilled and knowledgeable have much to offer. Transition to agroecology is a learning process for any farmer which can take time. Various personal, farm specific and external events can trigger farms into thinking about such change and the farmers that participated in our report illustrate quite clearly the benefits to the environment, the productivity achievements as well as the challenges and risks.”

The report concludes that farming systems that work with nature can be profitable and productive while providing both environmental, social and personal benefits. Meeting inspirational people in the UK and abroad, valuing peer to peer exchange of information with like-minded people rather than top-down knowledge transfer were crucial factors.

Rob Cooke from Natural England and Chair of LUPG said, “We warmly welcome this report which makes a valuable contribution to the evidence to inform our advice on future options for farming and environment policy in the UK. More environmentally sustainable farming such as the agroecological approaches considered in the study provide opportunities to develop new business ventures, in turn helping to develop the rural economy. The study shows how important social networks in our farming and rural communities are to achieving real change.”

The findings of the study can be found in the report ‘*Transition to agroecological approaches: farmers’ experiences*’. The report has recommendations for further action to support agroecology, including the need to develop a support programme to facilitate the transition towards more sustainable farming systems.

Please download the full report here: <https://www.nature.scot/transitions-agroecological-systems-farmers-experience>

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For more information on this press release, please contact: Morag Walker on (mobile) 07736 124097 or email: morag@moragwalkerpr.co.uk

Notes to editors

The Land Use and Policy Group (LUPG) comprises Scottish Natural Heritage, Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, the Environment Agency and Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

The report should be cited at: Padel S, Rubinstein O, Woolford A, Egan J, Leake A, Levidow L, Pearce B, Lampkin N (2017), *Transitions to Agroecological Systems: Farmers’ Viewpoints*. A Report for the Land Use Policy Group (LUPG). Organic Research Centre and Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. Newbury and Fordingbridge.

The Organic Research Centre (ORC): established in 1980, is the UK’s leading independent organic research charity. It works both nationally and internationally, to:

- Research and develop practical, sustainable land management and food production systems based on organic and agro-ecological principles
- Foster knowledge exchange with and between current and future producers, food businesses and related professionals
- Influence policy and public debates on the future of food and farming based on sound evidence.

www.organicresearchcentre.com

GWCT’s Allerton Project - Farmland ecology research in the 1970s and 1980s carried out by the Trust has resulted in the majority of wildlife enhancing measures that we now see in today’s agri-environment schemes. The Trust’s 333 ha Allerton Project at Loddington is a mixed arable and livestock farm that is unique within the UK in having developed a wide range of practical ways of restoring wildlife and integrating this approach into the farm business. The result of these wildlife-friendly farming techniques is the dramatic increases in wild game, farmland birds and other wildlife. As well as research, the Trust runs a range of courses which aim to bring together the wider aspects of biodiversity and wildlife conservation to encapsulate all the important aspects of environmental management. www.gwct.org.uk

