

On making an organic living – a letter to Tony Blair

Dear Prime Minister

A crisis of economic sustainability is eroding business confidence in British agriculture. The organic sector – the best business, sustainability and biodiversity model we have - is not immune from this uncertainty and is fearful of the real, future viability of organic production. The list of threats to the organic sector now includes what appears to be hugely unhelpful fallout from your recent EU budget settlement.

Despite the premium price for much of their organic produce, organic farmers don't just rely on the market for their total farm income. They need (as do conventional farmers) payments to manage the countryside to deliver the myriad, multifunctional outputs that society now demands of farming.

Agriculture is a long term business requiring long term planning. The EU budget settlement of last year – under your Presidency – is set to cut nearly 20 per cent from the EU rural development budget from which environmental stewardship payments are made to such “green farmers” as the organic sector. These are the very farmers who backed steps to move EU reform away from production and commodity support to funds for environmental benefit and who assumed there was now stability in EU funding to at least 2013.

Alongside such payment and funding uncertainty organic farmers are also at the mercy of an increasingly supermarket dominated supply chain. Tesco has already stated that its ambition is to pile organic produce high and drive down the price. That's a laudable aim for consumers, but unsustainable if producers are to stick to the true organic ethic and its attendant extra costs.

I recently visited an organic farm where a 200 cow dairy unit has been replaced by a 4000 bird laying hen unit. The free market dairy price had dropped to 19 pence a litre making two eggs worth more than a litre of milk. The cows have now gone, as have the two herdsman jobs, and the subtle patchwork of the countryside has altered for good.

Whilst realistic organic farmers have no expectation of Government led market regulation, they do have a reasonable expectation of long term Government support for the crucial job of sustainability and biodiversity delivery they have signed up to. Can you provide it?

Yours

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