

Dave Boulton
DEFRA –Rural Funding Review Unit
Ergon House
Horseferry Road
LONDON SW1P 2AL

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Dear Mr Boulton

Consultation response - Rural Development Programme for England 2007- 2013

Elm Farm Research Centre (EFRC) is an international research, advisory and education organisation based in Berkshire. The business of EFRC is to develop and support sustainable land-use, agriculture and food systems. This is primarily within local economies which build on organic principles to ensure the health and well-being of soil, plant, animal, man and his environment.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on policy development in this crucial area. EFRC is not alone in seeing sustainable, organic agriculture as an ideal vehicle to address EU and UK rural development goals to 2013 and beyond.

A central role for organic agriculture

On studying the Rural Development Programme for England 2007- 2013 consultation document it becomes evident that organic agriculture, rather surprisingly, receives no clear mention. This is despite the fact that organic farming has a recognised contribution to make across all four axes and should be specifically prioritised in each. Examples -

Axis 1 – Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector through added value and product differentiation from “commodity” production.

Axis 2 – Improving the environment and countryside through sustainable, holistic practices delivering improved biodiversity, soil care, water quality etc.

Axis 3 – Quality of life in rural areas and diversification in the rural economy through enhancement of rural employment, added value and processing employment and added value to “rural assets” such as hedges, woodland and overall landscape and biodiversity.

Axis 4 – The LEADER programme – organic opportunities and advantages here include high levels of co-operation and networking of local partnerships.

In addition there is a need for a mechanism in the cross-axis proposals of this Rural Development Plan to ensure proper integration of organic agriculture policy and development across the axes.

We propose the organic Action Plan group could supply advice and assistance for such a mechanism.

In keying this England programme into the overall EU Rural Development Programme 2007 - 2013, it is important to remember clear guidance from the EU Council and Commission on the treatment and role of the organic sector.

The Commission's strategic guidelines on Rural Development policy state that Member States "will also wish to reflect on how to take into account other EU level strategies such as the Action Plan for organic food and farming". (EC 2005)

In the Action Plan itself Member States are encouraged to make a greater and more coherent use of the different rural development measures in order to make public support for organic farming more effective (EC 2004).

In particular, ACTION 6 of the Plan states -

"The Commission strongly recommends Member States to make full use within their rural development programmes of the instruments available to support organic farming, for example by developing national or regional Action Plans focussing on -

- stimulating the demand side by using the new quality schemes
- actions in order to preserve the benefits for the environment and nature protection on the long term
- developing incentives to organic farmers to convert the whole instead of part of the farm
- organic farmers having the same possibilities for receiving investment support as non-organic farmers
- developing incentives to producers to facilitate the distribution and marketing by integrating the production chain by (contractual) arrangements between the actors
- support to extension services
- training and education for all operators in organic farming, covering production, processing and marketing
- targeting organic farming as the preferred management option in environmentally sensitive areas (without restricting organic farming to these areas)

Within the EU strategic guidelines on rural development policy, organic farming is prominently mentioned under the heading "Improving the environment and countryside", with reference to Axis 2.

"Member States should focus support on key actions such as ...consolidating the contribution of organic farming. Organic farming represents a holistic approach to sustainable agriculture. In this respect, its contribution to environmental and animal welfare objectives could be further reinforced...".

Theme 2 – Making agriculture and forestry more competitive and sustainable (Point 44)

EFRC considers that competition and sustainability are not truly compatible in terms of rural development. The cereal prairies of Kansas and the Ukraine are currently globally competitive but are not sustainable. This Rural Development Programme for England 2007- 2013 consultation document does not make clear the inferred marriage of priorities in bringing EU agriculture and the food chain closer to world markets whilst protecting and improving the environment with attendant costs.

England's aim cannot be to become a lowest cost, agricultural commodity producing region. Multifunctional countryside outputs in our crowded island such as amenity, landscape and biodiversity have real market value.

Agroforestry

Throughout the Rural Development Programme for England 2007- 2013 consultation document agriculture and forestry are treated as separate enterprises and entities. EFRC, especially at its Wakelyns trials site in Suffolk, is playing a central role in the development of agroforestry systems integrating agriculture with forestry.

Currently support and assistance for agroforestry in England is confused, as bureaucracy appears unable to address "farming with trees" or "trees with farming". This new rural development programme presents an opportunity to address agroforestry's real contribution to all the Axis goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion we urge that the on-going development and growth of organic food and farming should be a specific priority of each of the four Rural Development axes in the planning for the period 2007 -2013 (and beyond) in order to avoid fragmentation of effort over a large number of targets. We look forward to further consultation and debate with officials and Ministers before this key set of policy instruments are finalised.

Yours sincerely

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