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Leading UK scientist questions ‘confused signals’ from Defra over farm policy direction

UK plant scientist Professor Tina Barsby OBE has challenged suggestions from a senior Defra official that the future for UK farm survival may lie in diversification away from primary production.

Former FSA chief executive Emily Miles, who recently took up a new role as director-general for food, biosecurity and trade at Defra, told MPs on the House of Commons EFRA Committee earlier this week that more uptake of agri-environment schemes and greater diversification of farm businesses, for example into processing and marketing of food products, may offer a way forward.

But Professor Barsby, a former director of UK crop research organisation NIAB and a member of the Science for Sustainable Agriculture (SSA) advisory group, warned that these statements risked sending confused signals from the department, at odds with the Government’s aim for the country to produce more food, and out of step with the Prime Minister’s repeated pledge that ‘food security is national security’.

“When independent assessments suggest that the Government’s current farm support policies are incentivising England’s farmers to produce a quarter less food, and when a recent Food Standards Agency report indicated that one in four people in the UK are still ‘food insecure’, what exactly does the Government mean by food security?” she asked.

“In an increasingly unstable world, recovering from a global pandemic and facing the triple shock of war, spiralling energy costs and extreme climate events, we must be very cautious about pursuing agricultural policies which encourage farmers to adopt lower-yielding practices, or which focus on diversifying away from primary production.”

She said shifting the emphasis away from primary production could also affect UK-based investment and R&D activity in the technologies and tools farmers will need to drive increased production with a reduced environmental footprint.

“This country is a proud agricultural nation. In an average year, we produce as much wheat as Argentina, on a third of the land area. The unremitting focus of our farm policies should be on helping farmers to optimise production, as efficiently and sustainably as possible, using as small a land area as possible, so releasing other land for nature recovery and carbon sequestration.”

Professor Barsby challenged a suggestion from Defra officials giving evidence that the key to productivity gains lay in soil quality and animal health improvements.

“Actions to improve soil and animal health are really important components of good agricultural practice, but they will not in themselves deliver productivity improvement. Independent research has shown that access to genetic innovation delivered through plant and animal breeding is the single most important factor driving gains in productivity. Without the past 20 years of plant breeding, for example, an extra 1.8 million hectares of land would have been needed elsewhere to produce the same amount of food, causing more than 300 million tonnes of extra GHG emissions.”

“In this context, the most significant challenge for domestic food production relates to closing an increasing ‘yield gap’ between actual and potential production. This is where the Government can and must focus its efforts, and where farmers need help from the state, in the form of independent advice, access to technology, and the incentive to be more productive and efficient. Most farmers I know do not want to be compensated for production foregone. They cannot all become diversified artisan food producers. And they do not want to see their productive capacity dismantled by Government policies, along with the essential allied industries which support the industry.”

Professor Barsby pointed to peer-reviewed research which has suggested that adopting a new, more land-efficient approach to UK farm policy, with a focus on sustainable, high-yield production, could deliver on food security, nature and the climate objectives at less cost to the public purse:

“A [peer-reviewed study](#) by researchers at the Universities of Cambridge, Leeds and Glasgow, published in the journal *People and Nature*, concluded that a land sparing approach of focusing some land entirely on high-yield food production to allow more space for nature on unfarmed land would be far more cost-effective than prolonging the current land sharing approach of paying farmers to adopt lower-yielding production systems. To achieve the same overall outcomes for nature and biodiversity, sharing will cost twice as much and reduce food production by 27% more compared to land sparing.”

“Given the current Government’s budgetary constraints, and with such a strong commitment to food security, surely the potential of a policy approach which scientists say can deliver food production, biodiversity and climate targets at half the cost to taxpayers warrants closer examination?” she concluded.

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Notes

Science for Sustainable Agriculture (SSA) is a policy and communications platform, providing a focal point for information, comment and debate around the role of science and innovation in modern, sustainable agriculture and food production. Supported by an independent advisory group of political, scientific and industry leaders from a range of

sectors and backgrounds, SSA's aim is to promote a conversation rooted in scientific evidence, rather than ideology. Science for Sustainable Agriculture provides a platform for like-minded individuals and organisations to champion and explain the vital role of science and technology in safeguarding our food supply, tackling climate change and protecting the natural environment, as well as to expose, comment on and challenge unscientific positions or policy decisions in relation to sustainable agriculture.

Further information about Science for Sustainable Agriculture is available [here](#).

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