

# Biodiversity and organic farming – where next after Curry?

Ian Alexander

*English Nature, Slepe Farm, Arne, Wareham, Dorset BH20 5BN, UK*

## ABSTRACT

The recent Curry Commission report recognised the need to provide incentives for the production of public goods in terms of the environment. This is a particular advantage for organic farming because its biodiversity benefit is no longer being seriously questioned and many, large NGOs have a positive policy attitude towards organic farming. However, to ensure a good deal for organic farming in any new development of agri-environment schemes, the organic sector needs to play a positive role, with careful consideration of all steps in the development of policy.

## INTRODUCTION

The Curry Commission Policy Report on the Future of Food and Farming said 'Environment is the one place where we do see a place for continuing support for agriculture, incentivising the production of environmental public goods, which would otherwise be under-provided by the market'.

A large part of 'environment' as far as government is concerned, is biodiversity. This is an advantage for the organic movement because:

1. The evidence that there is a biodiversity benefit from organic farming is no longer being seriously questioned.
2. Some influential partners, including NGOs with millions of members, are now publicly supporting a more prominent use of organic as part of the policy mix for more sustainable farming.

## NEEDS

We need to work with this gain by building on the alliances already established.

An ongoing support payment, at least in the lowlands, is now possible, but it will be in exchange for some measures designed to:

1. Help new entrants swiftly move towards the best practice adopted already by many existing organic farmers.
2. Make the deal WTO compliant.

There are two big questions still undecided:

1. Will the payment made to organic farmers be more, and if so how much more, than the payments offered to conventional farmers following similar prescriptions?
2. Will the scheme be competitive or will access, for organic farmers, be guaranteed?

To some extent the answers to these questions will depend on an interplay between the strength of the case made and how much money is made available through modulation.

What do we need to do to help build the deal?

1. Exercise the utmost environmental responsibility/best practice on all organic farms at all times. Negative stories about organic farms/farmers, even if anecdotal, have an impact at a policy level far greater than their actual effect on the ground.
2. Build and strengthen alliances with the environment/nature conservation movement. If you have not done so already, make a commitment to befriend and educate a 'conservationist'. And remember education should be a two-way process: listen to what they are telling you as well.

Remember, however good the deal on new agri-environment, the market will still supply the greater part of most farmer's turnover. For this to work for everyone, we still have to satisfy six steps:

1. A defined and regulated set of standards
2. With a proven ability to deliver environmental benefits
3. Linked to a brand consumers trust
4. So that lower levels of productivity
5. Can be compensated by premium prices
6. Which pass back down the supply chain to the farmer.

If any new agri-environment deal leads to farmers taking their eye off the market-place, premiums will be *replaced* by public goods payments, rather than being *added* to by public goods payments.

## REFERENCES

Report of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002) Farming & Food: a sustainable future. Crown Copyright, 152 pp. Also available at <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/farming>

From: Powell et al. (eds), *UK Organic Research 2002: Proceedings of the COR Conference, 26-28<sup>th</sup> March 2002, Aberystwyth*, pp. 251-252.