

A farmer on feeding the world  
Business as usual is not an option, says Oliver Dowding

My first 13 years of farming saw endless lorry-loads of fertilisers and chemicals coming on to the farm. The controls on their usage, and the consequential problems, were evidently increasing. I re-examined what I was doing and who the gainers and losers were.

Conclusion: I needed to cut down the inputs, improve sustainability, stay friends with the consumer and re-enliven my soils.

We all want to produce sufficient food to supply the full nutritional requirements of the human species, whilst attempting to live in harmony with the natural environment and its finite resources. Simple... except it's not.  
Subheading

Livestock farmers appreciate that every farm has a maximum stocking rate, beyond which animals will be underfed without importing food. If those imports are not available, starvation is the consequence. We need to adjust the numbers of animals farmed, because the supplies of grain and proteins are going to become pressurised by the reducing quantities of available fertilisers, oil and other inputs.

We need to appreciate the finite nature of natural key resources upon which agriculture depends. Oil, phosphate fertiliser and access to fresh water being the principal inputs. The use of 'fossil' water <http://bit.ly/aHP7D6> reserves illustrates the problem, and whilst it's not a problem in the rainy UK, it is in many countries from which we import food, often to feed livestock – as seen in the staggering scale of imported GM soya from Brazil to feed British cows for example.

Farmers are the largest consumers of these resources. With what responsible logic can we justify feeding livestock tonnages of grains and proteins? As Simon Fairlie has described on this blog and in his book *Meat: A Benign Extravagance*, it's a horribly inefficient way to produce food. If only we could stand back and assess it logically and not feel threatened by our own, as farmers, vested interest.

Subheading

Why not [embrace the findings](#) of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development which concluded that "business as usual" was not an option?

Reducing feeding grains and proteins to livestock will save natural resources, and indirectly improve people's health. Furthermore, huge areas of currently crop-producing land would then grow grass, still to support livestock, enabling preservation of fragile and diminishing soils by minimising soil erosion.

Some may think these policy shifts equate to less food for most people. It may for a few, but it won't necessarily for the majority. And would that be a bad thing? Astonishing food wastage occurs through over consumption – people becoming fat – also known as the obesity epidemic in politically-correct language. We now have [more obese people](#) in the world than hungry, and the vast majority of this is avoidable. When did this become acceptable?

Perhaps these policy shifts would make food more expensive. Then we'd all eat different diets, with less meat, and those over-consuming will necessarily reduce intake. This would also lead to less waste minimisation during food processing and domestically: nobody in 2011 should accept the [18 million tonnes](#) of food waste. Whilst some is unavoidable, a huge amount is careless at best.

By using less land to grow feed for animals, substantial areas of current cropland could be afforested, recreating the lungs of the world, and some land can switch to energy production to be used locally.

Furthermore, these significant changes would dispense with the temptation to tinker with nature's genetics by utilising GM crops. Other nicely developing breeding techniques, such as [marker-assisted breeding](#), will enhance yields and improved resistance to attack, whilst keeping our customers onside.

Subheading

Delivering radical change is difficult. Nobody would suggest otherwise. But we don't have the choice, and the sooner we start the less Draconian the action will need to be.

If we won't do this for society, and ultimately for our children's sake, and continue to prefer prevarication then we drive the car towards a cliff edge. Either we make a reasonably gentle turn now, or continue taking risks, hoping for unknown options for our salvation will appear later.

Are farmers big enough to do this? It will obviously have negative implications for the capital values of many of our businesses. But, do we, as part of a bigger society, have any realistic alternative option?

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Oliver Dowding bio

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