

Sustaining Food, Sustaining Farmers

4th Conference of the British-German Environment Forum

Royal College of Agriculture, Cirencester, UK

25 and 26 November 2002

Executive summary

The fourth conference of the British–German Environment Forum brought together some fifty experts from government, farmers’ associations, NGOs, universities and the media in both countries to explore issues of sustainability in agriculture and food production. A number of participants were also directly involved in agriculture as small-scale farmers.

The conference was timely. In the UK, the Curry Commission had recently produced its report on *Farming and Food: a sustainable future*, setting a new agenda for food and agriculture policy. In Germany, Renate Künast, the Green Minister of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture, is spelling out an innovative, more sustainable, vision. Perhaps most significant of all, reform of the monolithic, production-oriented Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had now become a real prospect with the publication, in July 2002, of the Commission’s mid-term review. This proposed to cut the link between production and direct payments, to increase support for rural development, and to develop higher environmental, animal welfare, food safety and occupational safety standards.

So ‘sustainability’ in all its many different aspects – environmental, economic, political, scientific, technological, cultural – had now achieved a high place on local, national, European and international agendas for the first time for many years. Forum participants were eager to take the debate forward, and to investigate the complex interconnections between agriculture, rural communities, and every part of the food production chain.

Discussions focused on three main topics that together form the building blocks of sustainability for farmers, consumers and the environment:

- achieving environmental sustainability for farming
- safeguarding diversity and local production in a globalising marketplace
- consumer confidence and food safety.

Broad (though by no means always unanimous) agreement was reached on a number of important topics. These included:

- positive support for the mid-term review of the CAP, and for directing resources away from subsidising production
- the potential dangers of globalisation for the agricultures of both Europe and the developing world
- the risk to food safety of governmental and commercial policies that concentrate on providing cheap food at the expense of quality and variety
- the dangers of arrogance in policy development, and of ignoring consumers' wishes, especially in relation to GM foods.

Specific suggestions that emerged from debate, informed by participants' wide-ranging expertise in and experience of food and agriculture, included:

- the urgent need to re-establish trust in every aspect of the food chain: from scientific research through government policy and farming practice to the information supplied by retailers
- the importance of creating environmentally sustainable regional markets (and strengthening those that already exist) for produce, if necessary through publicly funded support schemes
- the need to create co-operative processing, marketing, distribution and promotional arrangements for farmers
- the growing division between an increasingly urbanised population and the land and those who work on it, and the consequent need to rekindle links and, through public education, to develop greater understanding of agriculture and food.

The broad similarity between the agricultural sectors of the UK and Germany, and the common nature of the problems each faces, means that each country can learn from initiatives undertaken in the other; both will benefit from co-operation in international and supra-national fora. Links forged or strengthened at the conference will help to take these processes forward.

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