

Workshop: Livestock

Livestock production in the 21st century faces many challenges. The intensification of production systems across the world is leading to associated health and welfare problems – ‘factory farming’, avian flu and foot and mouth – as well as human obesity linked to high meat intakes, and increasing concerns over greenhouse gas emissions from livestock. As a result there are growing social and ethical concerns about how meat is produced and what role it plays in our diet.

Yet livestock farming plays a central role in most organic farming systems and large proportions of UK land are marginal/upland and unsuitable for crop production. So what are the key challenges facing organic livestock production and how will livestock systems evolve over the next 10–20 years?

Chair:

Phil Stocker, director of farmer and grower relations, Soil Association

Speakers:

David Davies Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS)

Philip Lymbery, Compassion in World Farming (CIWF)

Tim Finney, Eastbrooke Farm

Iain Tolhurst, Tolhurst Organic Produce

Key themes

1. Emissions

Modern livestock production makes a significant (negative) contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, largely through the production of methane and nitrous oxide. Efforts need to be made to reduce the sector’s contribution to emissions. Improvements can be made in a number of areas through:

- Lifecycle analysis – a better understanding of how emissions occur, not just in the production phase
- Consideration of feed sourcing and dietary alterations – for example, we know that fibre sugar and oil content will affect methane production
- Better feed analysis – so we know what we are feeding
- Breeding characteristics – look to select for wider characteristics than yield or growth rates
- The creation of case studies/models to display to others the viability of potential solutions.

There is a need for more:

- ‘Top-down’ science to deliver research and inform farmers about the most effective practices for reducing emissions
- Balanced debate, taking into account water utilisation and land diversity alongside carbon footprint considerations – the ‘carbon

debate' often dominates discussions and we need to keep a balance between important issues such as biodiversity, water , soil management, etc.

- A whole system approach that ultimately aims to achieve a closed loop system, whereby methods such as carbon sequestration reduce emission outputs.

2. Awareness

Most consumers still do not understand how and where their meat is produced. The public also don't understand what the term 'organic' really means, especially in relation to livestock production: they don't understand the welfare, environmental and social benefits when compared to livestock production in general.

In light of the challenges of climate change, the growing world population (9 billion people by 2050) and concerns about food security and land scarcity, public expectations for continued high levels of meat consumption must change – particularly pigs and poultry, which require huge levels of cereal inputs and land area.

Over 1/3 of **usable** (potential crop production) agricultural land is used for livestock production. We need to educate people in order to seriously reduce global meat consumption to ensure that we can feed people in the future – this is the greatest challenge.

- Educational efforts to inform the public about the real costs of 'cheap', readily available meat consumption; need to develop consumer understanding of how meat is produced, what they are paying for, and the for benefits of changing their consumption habits
- Better informing retailers about the importance of fair and stable pricing so that producers receive the price they need.

3. Markets

Small organic producers lack power and are increasingly losing ground in a competitive market as retailers make claims that 'out-do' organic with its multi benefits. Furthermore, market access and efficiency is inhibited by infrastructure and legislation.

Producers need to optimise market opportunities by considering market demands and their own potential to supply these markets. It is recognised that it is difficult to sell on a large scale, but opportunities often exist via direct sales and niche markets, often locally.

4. Sustainable farming

Farming systems that are reliant on cheap and plentiful oil will come under increasing pressure as a result of energy scarcity and associated rising fossil

fuel prices. Organic producers must lead the way to change perceptions and improve agricultural systems – and the numbers of people we can feed.

There is potential to:

- Develop integrated farming systems that optimise land use through a combination of extensive grazing, forestry, fruit and vegetable production and the utilisation of livestock as management tool
- Consider and compare the benefits of different farming systems, not just organic, and transfer this knowledge to farmers

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE AUDIENCE:

Organic is the solution but how do we communicate this to the public and top policy makers? Education is still absolutely vital for public awareness: most young people don't have a clue how their food is being produced: "People still don't really know about organic. We are still only 2% of the market."

Could organic producers be paid by the government for the 'environmental benefits' and carbon offsetting of their meat? Organic meat should always be primarily grass/forage fed – not barley.

There is a danger when criticising livestock production *per se* of the public perceiving organic and non-organic livestock production as one. We must be ready for this.

Everyone is avoiding the topic of 'population growth' – it might be un-PC but it is the fundamental issue that no one is talking about.

How can we better integrate livestock production into food production? We need help to feed more people.

We have only 'destroyed' the balance of the natural system over the last 60 or so years – we need to 'go back' to the 'right animal for the right place' but using modern technology and knowledge to achieve a sustainable approach.

Concerns over contradictions of the organic standards: is it right for organic to rely on organic imports over local supply? Is 'organic' actually being constrained by the regulation?

Organic is losing ground to 'local' conventional producers; the story is not as clear between the two. Conventional farmers are raising their game while organic farming has become much more 'intensive' over the past decade.

Increasing fuel costs will make local markets more competitive with the multiples.

Need to re-localise food production – need to develop infrastructure to deal with slaughtering of stock, for example. Can we push for the ability to kill on farm again?

