

Natural England Board



Meeting: 10
Date: 30 April 2008

Paper No: **NEB PU10 07**

Title: **Organic Farming – a policy scoping paper**

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1. Purpose

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to ask the Board to consider the scope of Natural England's policy on organic farming to inform our draft policy on more sustainable agriculture¹.
- 1.2. Annex 1 provides more information on the definition, objectives and principles of organic farming.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Board consider and agree the scope of the draft policy and evidence requirement.

3. Context

- 3.1. At its February 2008 meeting, the Board discussed the potential scope of Natural England's policy on more sustainable agriculture and agreed to consider the scope of our policy on organic farming at a future date.
- 3.2. Over 70% of England is currently managed for agriculture. Farmed landscapes are valued for the range of ecosystem services² they provide, as well as for their agricultural products. Around 3% of England's agricultural land is farmed under registered organic systems or is under conversion supported by Organic Entry Level Stewardship (OELS) payments, delivered by Natural England³. Regionally the biggest proportion of organic land is in the South West⁴.
- 3.3. Policy drivers include increasing pressures on land use (e.g. from the growing world demand for food and energy coupled with increasing scarcity, costs and awareness of the carbon impacts of fossil fuels), CAP reform, increasing

¹ Discussed at February 2008 Board meeting

² 'Ecosystem services' focus on the delivery of benefits to society provided by a well managed and healthy environment.

³ Since March 2008, Natural England also manages delivery of the Organic Conversion Information Service which provides free at the point of delivery advice to non organic farmers about how to convert to organic production.

⁴ Exact figure still needs checking

global trade and WTO reform, new technologies and recent sharp increases in market returns in some sectors.

- 3.4 Our policy on organic farming will need to reflect these drivers, ongoing work to develop a land use strategy for England and related policies, including CAP reform, water and soil. In that context, it will need to address the role of organic farming and conventional industrial farming systems and the contribution that different approaches can make as we move along the continuum.

4. Scope of the draft policy

- 4.1. Natural England's draft policy will:

4.1.1. Identify and take account of issues that could affect wider adoption of both organic and conventional farming systems and actual market responses e.g:

- a) continuing increase in world prices for fuel and food in a context of growing world demand for food and pressures on land and water etc available to grow food as a result of climate change;
- b) implications of maintaining current production and consumption patterns. (Currently around 40% of UK grain plus considerable quantities of imported grains and pulses, are used as livestock feed);
- c) a shift to a healthier diet of less but higher quality grass fed meat and more fruit and vegetables - a more efficient way to convert energy inputs to food energy outputs;
- d) significant commercial cultivation of GM crops (presence of more than minimal levels of GM products precludes organic certification);
- e) roll out of organic technology to the developing world – where this tends to raise yields when replacing subsistence farming.

4.1.2. Consider the contribution of organic farming to sustainable agriculture practice

- 4.2. In finalising our policy we will need to gather and analyse further evidence including:

4.2.1. Evidence of public benefits and disbenefits provided by organic farming systems relative to other farming systems.

For example:

- a) assess the findings of whole life cycle analysis comparing organic farming with other farming systems e.g. in relation to the GHG footprint;
- b) consider the extent to which organic farming conforms with the 'ecosystem approach' and how it performs in relation to the key components of more sustainable agriculture;
- c) identify areas where further improvement to organic standards and practice is desirable (e.g. in relation to GHG emissions);

- d) impacts on landscape and biodiversity, contribution to climate change adaptation at a landscape scale;
- e) opportunities for carbon storage in agricultural soils;
- f) impacts on land take for biofuels production;
- g) risks of exporting environmental burdens and the extent to which Natural England should concern itself with either the overseas impacts of our domestic actions or the potential need for some mitigation to be focused overseas.

Annex 1

Definition, objectives and principles of organic farming

1. Background

Organic farming and its associated environmental benefits are recognised by the United Nations (UN) which includes the proportion of agricultural land under organic farming as one of its indicators of sustainable development.

The UN states that '*organic farming involves holistic production management systems, for crops and livestock, emphasising the use of management practices in preference to the use of off-farm inputs. Organic farming contributes to reducing environmental loading on soil and water resources and pressure on biodiversity. the reduction of use of pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals combined with enhanced management of natural resources not only improves the health of ecosystems but also fosters the health of animals and people and increases income generation and communities' self reliance*'.

Multinational organic standards are variously set by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) by Codex Alimentarius (a joint Food and Agriculture Organisation / World Health Organisation food standards programme) and by the European Union.

The EU Action Plan for Organic Food and Farming focuses on developing the organic food market, making public support for organic farming more effective and improving standards. Some agri-environment measures within the Rural Development Regulation⁵ provide specific support for organic farming.

In the UK, organic food and farming is licensed by private certifiers such as Soil Association Certification and Organic Farmers and Growers. Their standards must conform to at least the standards of the EU regulation and this is enforced by Defra, taking advice from the Advisory Committee on Organic Standards (ACOS). Use of the term 'organic' in food labelling is legally protected and restricted to food complying with the regulation.

The Defra action plan for organic farming in England⁶ was updated in 2004. In addition to providing support for organic farming under the agri-environment programme it includes policies to increase public procurement of organic food.

Consumer demand for organic food in the UK rose by between 10% and 50% each year between 1995 and 2006. Demand has more than doubled so far this decade⁷. Defra's Action plan target is that by 2010 at least 70% of domestic demand for organic food that can be grown in the UK will be produced here⁸.

⁵ Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 of 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

⁶ <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/organic/policy/actionplan/pdf/actionplan2year.pdf>

⁷ Figures taken from the annual Soil Association Organic Market Reports

⁸ Demand growth is now so strong that % imports are now increasing again for some sectors.

2. Key EU Objectives and principles for organic farming - Extracts from Regulation EC 834/2007

Organic production is an overall system of farm management and food production that combines best environmental practices, a high level of biodiversity, the preservation of natural resources, the application of high animal welfare standards and a production method in line with the preference of certain consumers for products produced using natural substances and processes.

The organic production method thus plays a dual societal role, where it on the one hand provides for a specific market responding to a consumer demand for organic products, and on the other hand delivers public goods contributing to the protection of the environment and animal welfare, as well as to rural development.

Organic farming should primarily rely on renewable resources within locally organised agricultural systems. In order to minimise the use of non-renewable resources, wastes and by-products of plant and animal origin should be recycled to return nutrients to the land.

Organic plant production should contribute to maintaining and enhancing soil fertility as well as to preventing soil erosion. Plants should preferably be fed through the soil eco-system and not through soluble fertilisers added to the soil.

Livestock production is fundamental to the organisation of agricultural production on organic holdings in so far as it provides the necessary organic matter and nutrients for cultivated land and accordingly contributes towards soil improvement and the development of sustainable agriculture.

In order to avoid environmental pollution, in particular of natural resources such as the soil and water, organic production of livestock should in principle provide for a close relationship between such production and the land, suitable multi-annual rotation systems and the feeding of livestock with organic-farming crop products produced on the holding itself or on neighbouring organic holdings.

