



Fresh Produce Consortium

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Farmers Guardian
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Dear Alistair

Comment on article: Organic farming could result in drop in agricultural production

Based on the limited data on fresh produce provided in the report, which was commissioned by the Soil Association, I would contest the Soil Association's conclusion that yields of organic fresh produce are equivalent to those of conventional produce. The report confirms the realistic conclusion that organic farming cannot replace conventional farming in meeting the food supply needs of the current and growing population in the UK.

The report highlights many agronomic techniques which could be mistakenly perceived to be unique to organic production but which are well established and in widespread use by conventional production systems. The horticulture industry already leads in the adoption of integrated pest management systems which have been responsible for significant reductions of inputs in the production of fresh produce.

The reports states clearly that there would be 40% reductions in cereal yields under a wholly organic system which, to compensate for these losses, would require either far more domestic land for production, potentially at the expense of horticultural crops, or have to rely on increased imports, including animal feeds, such as soya. On this basis, with rising levels of obesity and the need to promote a healthy diet which includes 5-a-day, we might have to make critical choices regarding whether to grow fresh produce or cereals in England and Wales according to this report.

Using current farming methods we are currently 60% self-sufficient in the UK, and 74% self-sufficient in indigenous produce. Organic farming cannot produce consistently the same yields as conventional farming and meet the needs of the UK population, estimated to reach 79 million by 2057. We live in a global society and we need trade diversity to ensure the UK's food security; we would be even less self-sufficient under an organic regime. There is a place for both conventional and organic farming methods in a global market to provide consumers with choice, variety and, at the same time, ensure that we have a sustainable food supply.

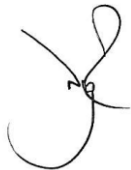
As this report states: 'the notion of organic agriculture being 'low input' is shown to be a somewhat simplistic view'. Conventional production is developing and adopting many technologies which reduce the environmental impact of production and distribution of fresh produce.

Studies looking at the impact of the loss of key crop protection products through EU Regulation have indicated that it may become uneconomic to grow some crops, and lower yields will mean consumers may have to pay higher prices for their fruit and vegetables. The European Parliament's AGRI committee concluded: 'It is unlikely that organic farming could be used to substitute for conventional agriculture because it typically produces smaller yields. ... European farmers and growers must be given access to a variety of pesticides, with different modes of action, as a vital method for IPM [integrated pest management] and for pesticide resistance management. If key pesticides are withdrawn too rapidly then the market will be unable to fill the gap in time.'

The UK Government and much of the agricultural industry is far from complacent about the challenges of maintaining food security and has sensibly recognised that this is a global issue. We do need to look at ways of tackling climate change, but let's look at the footprint of the whole product supply chain and provide consumers with meaningful advice on which to make informed decisions.

Organic farming certainly has its place in current and future farming systems, but let's not get carried away that it alone can be the answer to providing a regular supply of safe, affordable produce for the nations. As we face the challenges of an increasing world population, competing pressures on land available for production and the impact of climate change, let's allow the fresh produce industry to have every technique available at its disposal, and not compromise its ability to supply good quality affordable produce in a safe sustainable manner. As we now know that organic farming cannot meet the demands of our population perhaps it's time that the Soil Association accepts that food supply must be global and that new technologies including GM – organic or otherwise - must be considered seriously rather than ignored.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nigel R Jenney', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Nigel R Jenney

Chief Executive

