

Response to Freshinfo coverage – ‘Soil Association sets organic target’ (27 January 2009)

The Soil Association is setting a ridiculous target for UK agriculture to be totally organic by 2050 supposedly under the banner of ensuring our food security. The Association is living in cloud-cuckoo land if it thinks that by concentrating food production in the UK and solely using organic methods that the UK food and farming system will ‘be less vulnerable to external shocks and challenges’.

By limiting food production to the UK we will reduce the diverse range of produce available in our shops, particularly during certain growing seasons. Consumers will be restricted to a limited diet and deprived of some of their favourite vegetables and fruit, like bananas. In addition, food supplies may on occasion be more vulnerable to extreme weather conditions experienced in the UK rather than having the option of alternative sources of supply elsewhere in Europe and worldwide.

We live in a global society and we need trade diversity to ensure the UK’s food security. 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.

To claim that locally produced food has less impact on our environment and that consumers can reduce their carbon footprint by buying local produce is misleading. Changing the make-up of a family’s diet is shown by research to be a more effective means of lowering an average household’s food-related climate footprint than ‘buying local’. According to this same research reducing meat consumption, which is responsible for 46% of inputs in a conventional diet, would have far greater impact than buying locally grown food. Meat and dairy production is responsible for 8% of the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions, more than three times that of fruit and vegetables.

It’s impractical to expect that by 2050 the UK could access the significant amount of additional land which would be required to go totally organic. Using conventional farming methods we are currently 60% self-sufficient in the UK, and grow 74% self-sufficient in indigenous produce. Organic farming cannot produce the same yields as conventional farming and meet the needs of the UK population, estimated to reach 79 million by 2057.

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.

Our society faces a major health issue with rising obesity levels and on average the UK consumer eats only 2.5 servings of fruit and vegetables a day. We need to encourage the UK consumer to eat 5-day through initiatives such as the industry’s Eat In Colour campaign (www.eatincolour.com) and to enjoy a wide variety of affordable quality fresh produce regardless of its origin and means of production.