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Gove's shake-up is a missed opportunity for health and harmony

Diversity has to be the cornerstone of any agricultural policy capable of producing sufficient quantity of food in a way that sustainably delivers good outcomes for both humans and planet.

Highly specialised farming systems, in which diversity is an obstacle to efficiency, bear the greatest responsibility for our degraded soils, water, air and bio-diversity. Yet despite this, it has stubbornly remained in the ascendency of farming practice in the developed world, and much beyond, since WWII.

Globally, agricultural diversity has reduced drastically over the past 40 years. The UK has lost 12% of its farm holdings over the past 10 years as farms have consolidated, specialised, intensified, and industrialised. During this time mixed farming, where livestock and crops are farmed together, was largely rejected as an inefficient jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none system of farming. This post-war dismissal of mixed farming threw the beautiful baby out with the bathwater. At the heart of mixed farming is a centuries' old principle of sustainability. It is a circular system taking out from the soil and putting back in equal measure. Crops are grown in rotation with livestock fertilising the land as they graze, simultaneously building soil structure and fertility whilst converting plant matter - indigestible by humans – into healthy protein for human consumption. Farming systems which attempted to replace livestock with bags of synthetic fertiliser, have never replicated mixed farming's natural cycle of sustainability. The consequential loss of organic matter has contributed to a [loss of top soil in the UK of around 2.2m tonnes per year](#). And growing vast acreages of one type of crop significantly increases the attendant problems from pests and diseases, spawning a generation of pesticides which in turn have contributed to a [dramatic reduction in the UK's wildlife including flying insects and bee populations](#). It has set in train a vicious spiral propelling us ever-faster towards the bottom.

A return to mixed farming would be one big step towards UK agriculture reversing the loss of soil nutrients, fauna, flora, and public trust. Big change is required; difficult enough for any industry but especially so for one as naturally conservative as farming. It will, therefore, need its share of radical pioneers to help the conservative majority have the courage to think differently. One such radical intervention is [Effingham Estate's experiment to re-wild](#) 3,500 acres of prime West Sussex farmland in an attempt to create a sustainable farming system. The farming establishment undoubtedly views this *laissez-faire* approach as the antithesis of good farming practice. And whilst the Effingham approach is unlikely to be replicated on any kind of scale in UK agriculture, the farming establishment would be wise to recognise the Effingham Leap for what it is; a radical intervention which lays down a challenge for all in farming to thinking differently and commit to meaningful change.

In his Nuffield Farming Lecture Report 2018, ["Changing Food Cultures: Challenges and opportunities for UK Agriculture"](#), [Michael Winter, Professor of Land Economy & Society at Exeter University](#), points to a systemic change required throughout the food chain from farm to plate. His report notes that of the thousands of plant species documented as human food, incredibly just three – rice, wheat and maize – provide 50% of the world's plant-derived energy. There is a need, and a market opportunity, for UK farming to produce a greater diversity of grains and pulses. The Report's recommendations include a refocus of agricultural policy towards human health and nutrition, policy to encourage diversity of output, and the development of shorter, stronger supply chains.

The latter point speaks to other forms of diversification; size of farms and diversity of new entrants to farming. The common view that small farming is inefficient is being challenged. According to Winter's report, small farms can perform well, and provide a way in to farming for many new entrants, bringing with them a diversity of attitudes and skills. The importance of small farms is also crucial in providing the consumer with a trusted, shorter supply chain, a fact recognised by consumers following the horsemeat scandal in 2013 when [butchers and farmshops reported a 30% increase in sales of locally sourced meat](#), an issue which, if we need reminding, [can re-surface without constant vigilance throughout the supply chain](#).

In this context the new Agriculture Bill, the first since 1947, is not before time. It sets place the existing agriculture subsidy systems based on direct payment for acres owned, to a system which links payments directly to farmers' delivery of vital environmental outcomes. This has to be a move in the right direction for the environment, and should also provide smaller farms with a fairer share of the subsidy pot. There is, however, precious little detail in the Bill about food or human health. The big elephant between farmers producing nutritious food on farm, and the food the nation puts on its plate, is the powerful corporate interests of the food manufacturing and retail sector. The new Bill gives no more than a nod to redressing the established inequities in this vital part of the food & farming chain. It says nothing about the need to focus food production towards public health and the reduction of childhood obesity. Nothing about ensuring the integrity of shorter, stronger food supply chains, nor the need for legislation to rebalance the patently unfair David & Goliath power relationship between food retailers and farmers.

DEFRA must recognise its vision of health & harmony in UK food & farming is wholly dependent on re-establishing real diversity in our food & farming industry. Thus far, its commitment appears to fall someway short of its intent.