

PUSHING FOR LESS PERSISTENT PESTICIDES

An important policy report on the future of farming and food in the UK has been published

The Curry Report

'Older broad spectrum pesticide chemistry' should be replaced by 'newer, more selective, less persistent chemistry as soon as practicably possible'. This is one of the recommendations that emerged from the Policy Commission on Farming and Food's recent report *Farming and Food: a sustainable future*. The commission, chaired by Sir Donald Curry, was set up in August 2001 with a remit to advise the UK government on how to create a 'sustainable, competitive and diverse farming sector'. It comprises 10 people from a range of backgrounds, and includes Helen Browning, an organic farmer, and Sir Peter Davis, group chief executive of Sainsbury's.

Although the Commission welcomes the benefit to farming of advances in technology, it considers that 'some technological change, such as the widespread and sometimes indiscriminate use of pesticides and fertilisers has been damaging to the environment'. The commission recommends that techniques that reduce or avoid the need for pesticides, such as integrated farm management and organic farming, should 'continue to be a high priority for public research and technology transfer funding'.

The authors of the report hope that in the future 'the use of technology will not be subjected to the sort of sterile, polarised debate we have sometimes seen in the past'. They recommend greater involvement by the public in the regulatory and decision-making structures that govern the use of technology. The commission acknowledges public concerns over the possible harmful health effects of pesticides, particularly when used in 'combinations untested for undesirable consequences' – the so-called cocktail effect. However, it has complete faith in the UK's pesticide regulatory system, believing it be 'at the top end of international best practice'.

Capital allowances should be offered on specified new environmental pollution control and monitoring equipment in agricultural use, suggests the commission. It also recommends that the government should set up a new 'priorities board' for strategic research, involving government, academic, consumer, environmental and industry representatives. This board should set the agenda for research on farming and food matters and should be 'serviced by a team of its own scientists who can stay in touch with developments in the field', says the report.

The full text of the Curry Report can be downloaded from <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/farming/index/CommissionReport.htm>

Industry response

The Crop Protection Association, which is the crop protection industry's trade association welcomed the recognition by the Commission that technology 'provides solutions for how to bring productivity and sustainability together'. It said that its members have had that same goal for many years; they will continue to devote considerable resources to the hunt for ever more benign yet effective products.

<http://www.cropprotection.org.uk/>

Organic farming response

Patrick Holden, Director of the Soil Association, is urging the Government to give a clear lead to UK farmers. 'We want to see all the recommendations of Sir Don Curry's Commission on the future of food and farming implemented. Conventional farming is in crisis, and organic farming faces great uncertainty – Curry points a way forward, but only if the Government puts it into practice. We want Government action now on the following Curry recommendations: an organic action plan; local, fairtrade and organic food; an organic stewardship scheme; and a national network of organic demonstration farms.'

<http://www.soilassociation.org/>

The way forward

In a meeting on 26 March 2002, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, met with leaders of farming, food, rural, environmental and consumer bodies to discuss implementation of the recommendations in the Curry Report. Participants committed themselves to working together to deliver a new strategy for sustainable farming and food in England in the early autumn, incorporating a definitive response to the Policy Commission's recommendations. A group of key organisations, chaired by Food and Farming Minister Lord Whitty, will be established to steer development of the strategy. Also, in April and May, Ministers and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs will be involved in working sessions across the country to discuss how to turn the Policy Commission's vision into action with those people who can help to deliver practical policies and results.