



OF&G Manifesto: Championing organic within agricultural policy

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Organic - A robust foundation for the future of food and climate

With the agricultural sector undergoing a seismic transition, OF&G (Organic Farmers & Growers) is calling for greater advocacy of organic farming as part of a more robust farm support framework. One able to respond to the need for food production whilst addressing the significant climate and biodiversity challenges that we now face.

When policymakers and influencers talk about the need for transformation of our food and farming system and the management of our land, they often refer to agroecology and regenerative farming. However, these terms are defined in different ways by different people and groups. Organic farming is the only formally recognised and defined agroecological and regenerative approach, yet it appears often to be 'airbrushed out' of these debates.

OF&G strongly believes this is missing an obvious opportunity. Whilst it is important to recognise the broader context and the need to work on many different fronts, organic represents a scientifically proven approach that is working today within an established legislative framework. Organic must not be ignored or dismissed, especially at this critical time for the survival of rural ecology and the rural economy.



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The challenge is to ensure that farming in the future protects and enhances our natural environment whilst producing affordable food. As we transition to more environmentally benign methods of farming this will be a challenge for all.

The enormous costs of cleaning our rivers, mitigating the effects of climate change and the loss of soil health already place a significant burden on the public purse that cannot continue unchecked.

The fact that organic food is often more expensive than that produced by other means is, in part, because organic methods ensure that environmentally harmful practices are largely avoided and public goods are thereby provided. In economic terms these costs are 'internalised' rather than 'externalised' as is currently the case.

The organic retail food market has grown year on year for the last ten years, however the UK organic land area has not noticeably increased – a result of minimal and inconsistent support for the development of the organic sector.

The goal of climate-neutrality and biodiversity enhancement should provide sufficient motivation for government to back proven, environmentally favourable farming practices that do not demand re-invention.

OF&G is calling for organic to be more openly recognised within the new agricultural policy. Organic provides a verified solution to delivering the environmental ambitions of government and represents a clear opportunity for the UK's food and farming sector. This manifesto sets out why organic should be acknowledged and recognised and the organic opportunity taken.

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The family of Richard Thompson, OF&G's chairman, has been farming organically for 75 years.

Four principles underpin organic agriculture

The global organisation, the **International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements¹ (IFOAM OI)** formulated the guiding principles of organic agriculture. The four principles² of **Health, Ecology, Fairness and Care** can be seen as the connected ethical principles intended to inspire and inform the development of organics.

The principles are the roots from which organic agriculture grows and develops. They express what organic agriculture contributes to the world and are a vision for how to enable the development of agriculture globally.



Health

Organic agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of the soil, plants, animals, people and planet as one inseparable entity.

Ecology

Organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.

Fairness

Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.

Care

Organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.

It is the combination of these principles, supported by legally defined standards that makes organic food and farming unique.

¹ <https://www.ifoam.bio/>

² <https://www.ifoam.bio/why-organic/shaping-agriculture/four-principles-organic>

Organic delivers transformation across all farming systems

The farmed landscape faces many critical challenges including biodiversity loss, climate change, soil degradation and natural resource depletion. We are increasingly aware of the enormity of these problems, we believe that to confidently address them, diverse and multi-functional farming solutions such as organic are urgently needed.

Organic not only ensures good animal welfare, it also protects land from further degradation and supports the restoration of biodiversity and soil health.³ Organic farming increases soil carbon content whilst contributing to environmental resilience and climate adaptation, through improved soil structure, increased water retention capacity and effective cycling of energy and nutrients across the farmed landscape.⁴ It therefore has positive impacts on plant health and a much decreased risk of soil erosion, often exacerbated by extreme weather events.



Organic is a solution to carbon sequestration

A business-as-usual approach will not address the climate emergency. All sectors must be ambitious in their quest to permanently reduce harmful greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, simply talking about net-zero misses the point.

We need to cut farming's GHG emissions in real terms and then mitigate against remaining emissions. Practices that are standard in organic farming can contribute significantly through effective sequestration of soil carbon.

Our soils need healing. It is a matter of our own survival, and it is important that we set ambitious objectives on which we need to urgently deliver. Scientific evidence shows that organic farming delivers on soil health.

Organically farmed soils contain significantly higher organic carbon stocks compared to conventionally managed soils, and synergistically deliver benefits for healthy soils and biodiversity protection.

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³ <https://www.fibl.org/en/themes/soil-quality/>

⁴ https://www.organicseurope.bio/content/uploads/2020/06/ifoameu_advocacy_climate_change_report_2016.pdf?dd

Organic builds biodiversity

Our food systems rely on insects such as pollinators and yet biodiversity is in massive decline. Biodiversity loss, soil degradation and water pollution are a result of industrial practises in much of today's agricultural system. Organic farming methods create humus-rich top-soils, restore diversity above and below ground, retain water and contribute to solutions to water pollution. On average, organic farms host 34% more biodiversity than non-organic ones⁵.

By not allowing the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, organic farming avoids their unwanted negative effects

on water, soil & biodiversity. To aid pest and disease management, organic farms create multifunctional landscapes rich in crop diversity and wildlife habitat in and around production areas to favour natural predators and ecosystem support.

Organically farmed landscapes offer many benefits. On average, they are 50% more abundant with wildlife, hosting up to 34% more species on average on and around the farm. This includes almost 50% more pollinator species and 75% more plant species as well as more resilient systems⁶.



Organic is agroecological and regenerative

All organic farming is, by definition, agroecological and regenerative. It simultaneously produces food and supports wildlife. However, not all regenerative and agroecological farming, that alleges a transformative approach, is organic.

The blurry edges surrounding regenerative and agroecological agriculture are problematic and open to abuse – leading to the coining of the phrase ‘junk agroecology’⁷. These non-specific terms have been widely adopted by some businesses and corporations that profit from this inherent ambiguity, while undermining the transformative potential of a more clearly applied interpretation.

In fact, there is no agreed or regulated definition of regenerative or agroecological farming. While there are some excellent initiatives out there, this means that potentially hazardous synthetic fertilisers and harmful pesticides can be used, whilst animal welfare may not be prioritised, all under the guise of ‘high nature value farming’. The equivocation around terms like agroecology and regenerative is in sharp contrast to the legally binding standards in organic regulations.



⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/farming/organic-farming/organic-action-plan_en

⁶ <https://www.organicseurope.bio/what-we-do/biodiversity-soil-water/>

⁷ <https://www.foei.org/junk-agroecology-how-corporations-are-co-opting-peoples-solutions-to-the-food-crisis/>

Case Study

Cholderton Estate Defra Test & Trial

The development of the Environmental Land Management (ELM) policy in England is being supported by Defra through the implementation of many farm-based Tests and Trials. These aim to help better understand the way in which the new policy would deliver public goods for public money.

One of these detailed investigations used Natural Capital Accounting methods to assess the organically managed Cholderton Estate on the Wiltshire/Hampshire border. This was compared with a neighbouring non-organically managed estate. The team used Defra approved methodology and the results have been verified.

Cholderton Estate is a remarkable farm for biodiversity, as the results show. The Estate's owner, Henry Edmunds, converted to organic farming more than 20 years ago. A keen naturalist he aims to achieve a balance between the demands of modern competitive agriculture and the preservation of the countryside with a particular focus on habitats for plants and animals.

The results shown in the table (right) confirm that the organic system results in a positive Natural Capital account for the estate. This demonstrates that an organic system-based approach to land management delivers the public goods so urgently needed.

In terms of Net Greenhouse Gas (GHG) flows, the organic farm resulted in +1 tCO₂e/ha/year (equivalent to a 2020 value of +£70/ha), compared with negative flows of -0.35 tCO₂e/ha/year (equivalent to a loss of -£24/ha) on the neighbouring non-organic estate. This is an important result, but even more remarkable is the impact on biodiversity.

Biodiversity Units are calculated according to the habitat available for species to thrive. Defra has estimated an indicative value of £11,000 for each Biodiversity Unit. As the results show, the organically managed farm has at least five times the indicative biodiversity asset value on each hectare compared to the neighbouring non-organic estate. A remarkable result.

Natural Capital Account for an organic and a non-organic farm (all values expressed per hectare and year)

	Sequestration & Emissions tCO ₂ e/ha/yr		Value 2020 £/ha	
	Organic	Non-organic	Organic	Non-organic
Total sequestration	+ 2.2	+ 0.48	+ 157	+34
Total Emissions	- 1.2	- 0.83	- 87	- 59
Net GHG flows	+ 1.0	- 0.35	+ 70	- 24
	Natural Capital Asset Value – Private + Public 2020 £/ha			
	Organic	Non-organic		
Biodiversity	> + 115,300	+ 4,340		
Indicative asset value	> + 134,900	+ 24,374		

<https://ofgorganic.org/events/longest-running-organic-food-and-farming-conference-5-july-2022>

<https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2021/11/24/tackling-climate-change-and-extinction-the-farm-thats-showing-the-way/>

<https://www.cholderton-estate.co.uk>



"The pressure on us all because of the climate and nature crises is enormous, there really is no time to waste and organic has proven its case as an effective solution over many decades. The mixed farming enterprises we have at Cholderton are working, and because we're organic we're able to run an economically and ecologically successful farming business producing high quality food alongside and in harmony with the natural landscape."

Henry Edmunds, of Cholderton Estate

Species at Cholderton Estate

18
Bumble Bees

40
Butterflies

740
Moths

137
Wild Birds

70
Wildflowers

Organic ensures the integrity of our food

Organic certification is backed by legally defined regulations that require annual inspection audits of both organic farmers and the complete supply chain by organic certification organisations. These organisations must also be annually audited by the government appointed UK Accreditation Service (UKAS).

Organic works across all farming sectors and throughout the entire supply chain: from livestock feed, seed suppliers, farmers and growers, hauliers, food manufacturers, importers, exporters, distribution sites and retailers. This ensures the integrity of organic food and the high level of trust that the public have in the organic label.



An organic system can feed the world, safely and nutritiously⁸. It is critical now that we simultaneously address both the monumental wastefulness of our food system⁹, and the crisis in food related ill-health. We must bring our consumption in line with planetary boundaries¹⁰: less but better meat, less ultra-processed food, more fruit and vegetables, more simply processed food.



Organic has high animal welfare

Livestock play an important role within organic farming as the animals provide the organic matter and nutrients for cultivated land that contributes to soil improvement and the development of sustainable agriculture.

Organic respects high animal welfare standards that meet the species-specific behavioural needs of livestock. Organic farmers are required to provide an animal health plan to ensure animal health management is based on disease prevention. In this respect particular attention is paid to housing conditions, husbandry practices and stocking densities.

On organic farms the routine use of antibiotics is banned under organic standards, organic farmers are permitted to only treat animals with antibiotics when they are sick, not as a preventative measure.

Organic farmers focus on ethical responsibility, long-term productivity and high product quality. Good animal health and welfare of all farm animals are central to the organic principles. Compassion in World Farming strongly supports organic as the best form of humane and sustainable agriculture¹¹.



⁸ Strategies for feeding the world more sustainably with organic agriculture” - <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-017-01410-w>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200224-how-cutting-your-food-waste-can-help-the-climate>

¹⁰ <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2018-10-10-feeding-10-billion-people-by-2050-within-planetary-limits-may-be-achievable.html>

¹¹ <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/news/2009/08/organic-is-better-for-the-animals-and-for-you-too>

Organic can be one of a range of farming systems

History shows us that single fixes fail to resolve complex problems when in fact what is required are complex solutions.

Organic has a role to play in tackling the complex issues we face, while making a valuable contribution to securing financially viable farming, a sustainable food supply and preventing environmental collapse.

Organic is a food system that delivers across government departments, from health and food and farming to business and education.



Organic is the only globally recognised agroecological standard for food production

Organic certification is based on a long-established, proven and legally binding framework of rigorous organic standards. An independent annual physical audit and a thorough certification assessment are used to certify compliance with these standards.

Organic standards do not allow the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers and require positive action for good animal welfare. It's a successfully tried and tested system for regulatory compliance – something that we hope will be integrated into new agricultural policy.

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Organic delivers a market demand

As the integrity of the supply chain becomes increasingly threatened by lower quality food imports and untested technologies, more and more food shoppers are taking the positive step to choose organic.

There is a clearly defined market opportunity. The most recent data shows organic food and drink sales in the UK continue to increase post-Covid, and remain ahead of the rest of the mainstream market.



Almost 9 in 10 households purchased organic products in 2021¹² and it is predicted that around 62% of consumers will be 'eco-activists' by 2030, up from 29% in 2021¹³.

With consumer demand comes the potential to produce more good quality organic food whilst respecting the environment and animal welfare.



Organic is an untapped opportunity

Only around 3% of UK farmland is organically managed. In Europe the average is three times this and the European Union has proposed that 25% of agricultural land must be organically managed by 2030 to help deliver the EU's transformative Farm to Fork¹⁴ and Biodiversity¹⁵ Strategies.

Supported by the European Organic Action Plan, these strategies also include radical policies to reduce the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers. It demonstrates the EU's recognition of the value of organic land management.

In the UK, if 10% of UK farm land was organic, we would save at least a 9.4 million tonnes CO₂e in greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and benefit from increased carbon sequestration worth over £188 million annually in carbon permit trading terms.¹⁶ This would be the result of reduced synthetic fertiliser use, more extensive grazing, reduced livestock numbers, more rotational temporary grassland on crop land and increased soil organic carbon through organic matter recycling.

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¹² Kantar Data by the Organic Trade Board Dec 2021 - <https://www.naturalproductsglobal.com/food-and-drink/highlights-from-the-organic-trade-board-agm/>

¹³ Kantar Data by the Organic Trade Board Dec 2021 - Kantar Who cares? Who does? https://ec.europa.eu/food/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/biodiversity-strategy-2030_en

¹⁶ English Organic Forum: Why Organic 2021 - <https://ofgorganic.org/news/a-clear-consolidated-and-compelling-case-for-organic>

Conclusion: Organic is a transformative thread in farming policy

Organic farming is an essential element in a wider discourse about how we can alleviate the social and environmental impacts of our farming and food system. We should embed organic in future farming policy.

Our society is reliant on finite resources, we all need to be more careful in how we use these precious assets. To strike the right balance in the UK's approach, policy makers and those committed to developing an effective future-oriented policy must take a more consistent open-minded appraisal of the potential for organic.

Our politicians and decision makers must be bold and resolute. They have an enormous responsibility to protect our environment and reduce the use of products derived from fossil fuels. They really must support organic farming, which is tried and tested. Time is running out.

Equally, the UK organic sector needs to regain its confidence. Those who are exponents of organic principles and practise can be justifiably proud of what they do. We invite government, environmental NGOs and colleagues across the food and farming sector to wholeheartedly embrace organic.

Organic has so much to offer as part of the newly emerging approach to farming and food. We are proud of the word 'organic' and of what organic demonstrably delivers.

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