



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Science and Technology in Agriculture

To: Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair, EFRA Committee

22 November 2024

Dear Alistair

Many congratulations on your appointment as chair of the House of Commons EFRA Committee. Your Committee has a vital role to play in scrutinising the policies and performance of Defra at such a critical time for food, agriculture, climate change and the environment.

I note that you are inviting suggestions of topics for the Committee to investigate, and I wonder if you might consider hosting an inquiry into the issue of sustainability metrics and the collection and use of environmental data in UK agriculture?

I was recently honoured to be elected for a second time as chair of the APPG on Science and Technology in Agriculture. The need to adopt consistent and evidence-based metrics of sustainability in agriculture has been a long-running issue of interest for the All-Party Group, indeed ever since the US-based [Field to Market](#) platform presented its approach to the collection and use of farm-level data to the APPG more than a decade ago, when I first chaired the Group as a newly elected MP.

In February 2022, my predecessor as APPG chair Julian Sturdy raised the issue in a [Westminster Hall debate](#) on behalf of the All-Party Group, but received a fairly non-committal response from Defra.

As a Group, we have consistently argued that a national, centralised approach to the collection, analysis and application of farm-level environmental data is needed to provide an essential evidence base to benchmark and track the impact of farm policies (like ELMs, SFI), to inform and drive best practice improvements in sustainable, efficient production at individual farm level, and to provide meaningful information to consumers about the environmental impact of their food choices.

This was the original vision behind Agrimetrics as one of the four Agri-Tech Centres established by the Agri-Tech Strategy, which I helped launch as Minister for Life Sciences a decade ago. Unfortunately, however, this has not transpired in practice. Agrimetrics has proved to be a major missed opportunity to harness the potential value of farm-level data at a national level, and to strengthen the evidence base behind a transition to more sustainable and productive farming systems.

It is important that we learn lessons from the first 10 years of the Agri-Tech Strategy, because the challenges facing global agriculture are becoming more urgent all the time, and Britain, with its world-class research base in biological, engineering and data sciences, has a significant contribution to make.



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Defra has also previously funded ground-breaking work on sustainability metrics as part of the 2014-18 Sustainable Intensification Research Programme, led by a team of economists and data experts at the University of Nottingham. This included the development of a farmer-friendly dashboard, compatible with most farm software packages, allowing producers to benchmark their farm's performance across a range of sustainability indicators, and to compare against a weighted average of their peers, so identifying areas for potential improvement. We do not understand why this Defra-funded work has not been taken forward to farm-level application.

The lack of a single, co-ordinated, national approach to collecting farm data has led to a proliferation of competing commercial carbon foot-printing tools, which Defra-funded research has shown often provide differing results for the same input information. Efforts to harmonise these tools are underway, while a number of other related initiatives are also in development. The Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD), for example, has conducted a significant body of work into food 'eco-labelling', feeding into the Government's Food Data Transparency Partnership, and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) recently announced plans to create an 'ecosystem' for collecting and reporting farm-level environmental data.

I genuinely believe that an EFRA Committee inquiry focused on providing a coherent overview of the projects under way to support the development of sustainability metrics in UK agriculture would make a timely and constructive contribution to the policy-making process, not least to ensure Defra is closely involved in the co-ordination of these various initiatives, and to ensure we end up with a consistent, industry-wide approach.

In line with the oft-quoted adage "If you can't measure it, you can't manage it", I cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of having a robust and consistent approach to the collection and use of farm-level data, not only to help Defra measure and evaluate the impact of its farm policies, but also to drive farm-level improvements in sustainable efficient production, and to provide meaningful information to consumers about the sustainability footprint of their food choices.

Do please let me know your thoughts. We would be very happy discuss further, suggest potential expert witnesses, themes etc.

With best wishes

George Freeman MP
Chair, APPG Science & Technology in Agriculture