

**“ I think all we can do as farmers, is strive to improve while being mindful at the speed which we’re expected to do so. ”**

## What does good look like?

**Is it possible to define what constitutes ‘good’ when it comes to policy making in relation to sustainability? To find out, CPM opens up the discussion for the second of this month’s Real Results Roundtables.**

**By Janine Adamson**

**As interest grows in the wider benefits of environmental activities on farm, stakeholders from the sector and beyond are striving to define sustainability and devise associated metrics for its measurement.**

At the same time, with a new government in power, it’s arguably more important than ever to ensure policy makers and regulators have a robust understanding of the challenges and demands placed on British agriculture.

But how should sustainability be measured and what constitutes success in terms of balancing long-term farm business productivity and environmental stewardship?

In a bid to explore this topic, CPM brings together BASF public and governmental affairs manager, Jon Williams; farm manager of the Raby Estate, Philip Vickers; AIC head of sustainability, Vicky Robinson; and Professor Paul Wilson from the University of Nottingham.

### **Starting point**

According to Paul, who opened the Roundtable, the starting point for quantifying sustainability in farming should be greenhouse gas emissions and carbon. “Unless we solve that challenge, then we’re not going to get anywhere in terms of sustainability.”

Furthermore, he stated that he’s concerned by the relatively simple metrics which currently exist because they report at a per hectare or per farm level. “Therefore, they’re missing the crucial element of a functional unit. For example, knowing the carbon footprint



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AIC's Vicky Robinson reminded that aside from environmental impact, sustainability metrics also involve economic and social pillars as well.

of a kilogram of wheat, a microgram of protein in that kilogram of wheat, or the bioavailable nutrient to the human body.

"If we do the opposite and just look at carbon or greenhouse gas emissions per area, farm or region, we end up with a race to the bottom where we may produce nothing and export our carbon consequences to other countries around the world," explained Paul.

In agreement, Vicky added that there's more to sustainability than just environmental considerations. "If we're talking sustainability metrics, you have the economic and the social pillars as well.

"There's a risk of carbon tunnel vision – how do you ensure that you don't have unintended consequences for some of the other natural and environmental assets that we depend on, for example, water or biodiversity? But equally, food production and productivity – it's complex."

To respond, Philip shared his perspective as a farm manager. "Working for Lord Barnard at the Raby Estate, he's very pragmatic and has a responsibility to feed people – you only have to look back at the recent Ukraine crisis for context.

"It's reassuring to work in a country that not only has freedom, but also the ability to produce quality food. As an industry, we don't want to lose sight of that yet at the same time, we have to be smarter with inputs and use all of the tools in the box appropriately and sensibly," he said.

## Flexibility

Jon raised the problems which may occur as a result of creating a one-size-fits-all approach to measurement. "In terms of being sustainable and having metrics, you may have on-farm practices which are more impactful on the soil such as potato or sugar beet production. Does that mean that business isn't sustainable?"

"Is it about a singular practice or is it cross rotational? If you're a low-input system, are you more environmentally sustainable than a farmer producing vast quantities of calories per hectare?"

"Perhaps we could we have 'sustainable intent' – an umbrella which all farm systems sit under and can deliver in some, but maybe not all aspects," he explained.

Philip stressed that flexibility is a must. "I think we have a real risk that if it's prescribed we can't do X, Y or Z, production will take a huge hit.

"At the moment, we're going through extremely challenging weather here in County Durham. It's been wet for a very long time and we still have beans left to harvest [at the time of the Roundtable]. So we can't be put into a straightjacket and told we have to meet stringent criteria – we have to have the flexibility to plough occasionally if its required," he commented.

## Key players

The Roundtable discussion then shifted to who should be involved in defining what

sustainable practice actually is, with Jon flipping the concept on its head. "I think it should be more of an industry-led definition of what's sustainable and financial institutes or retailers then buy into those practices.

"If we look at the transport sector – investment is made in roads and networks to make it better. So is there a mechanism in agriculture where investors could invest in soil to improve it, for example, through building resilience, increasing water retention and preventing flooding?"

In response, Vicky highlighted the commitments already being made by the finance and retail sectors. "With an increasing focus on greenwashing there's a lot of concern around ensuring there's the data and evidence to support claims. As such, that can lead to some very binary decisions regarding inputs such as fertiliser.

"Whereas fertiliser impacts yield, it's also vital for meeting quality specs as well, which means for example, increased milling wheat imports if specifications can't be met.

"What the AIC is hearing from members, is that they feel these drivers are top-down rather than the industry having a level of control. So how do we have open stakeholder discussions where the different sectors come together and speak the same language?"



If farmers are instructed to grow high quality food produced in the best technological manner it'll incur a cost which could exclude some individuals from affording their daily bread, suggested the Raby Estate's Philip Vickers.



*BASF's Jon Williams believes there's better departmental communication under the current administration.*

## Data collection

With measurement, of course comes data. To discuss this further, Jon queried how much data should be gathered to better understand the current situation and what has to occur to make improvements.

"Then there's the element of who owns the data and how it's being used; whether people are making money on the back of information which is owned by farmers. How can we ensure that data isn't used for unruly purposes?"

In reply, Vicky raised the concept of carbon being an 'invisible' product. "You can't see it so it's hard to know whether it is truly 'there'. We have to know what it is we're trying to achieve, what actions are required, and what data will evidence that action.

"It feels at times as though data is being gathered despite not really knowing why, but we've done it so we have it just in case we require it in the future and to show something," she explained.

Philip added that quality also has a bearing on the usefulness of data. "You could say that a little bit of good data is far better than a lot of poor data."

## Societal diversity

To continue, Philip stated the entire sustainability debate hinges on what the UK is trying to achieve and that acknowledging socioeconomic diversity is critical.

"If farmers are instructed to grow very high quality food produced in the best technological manner that will incur a cost which could exclude some individuals from affording their daily bread, so to speak."

Paul agreed: "In reality, most people are trying to feed a family on a low budget rather than traveling to a farmers market to buy some sustainable bread.

"The number one driver of food consumer choices is price. People won't change their food habits to look after themselves in terms of their health, so they're not going to instantly change their food habits to look after the planet," he stressed.

## Influencing policy

When it comes to influencing future policy, Vicky suggested that it involves both cross sector and cross departmental communication. "We know even within government departments there are silos, let alone across government which again creates a challenge."

In response, Jon said he perceives there to be better departmental communication under the current administration. "Hopefully they're getting their act together and having that dialogue about what good looks like moving forward.

"Equally, the Department for Business and Trade could have a huge influence on new innovation and technology which can help the sustainability piece to become easier to deliver. Aspects like biodiversity net gain, the fact is you require boots on the ground to measure it – is that a sustainable practice long-term? So where does technology come in to measure and simplify the process?"

For Philip, it's back to understanding what the end goal is. "I think all we can do as farmers, is strive to improve while being mindful at the speed which we're expected to do so.

"There is some urgency behind all of the problems we have – climate change seems to have accelerated. So it's timescale, speed of improvement and where the red lines are through guidance from politicians," he said.

Jon reminded of the land-use framework. "As such, it's whether we're happy exporting our asks to Third World nations for food, biodiversity and carbon etc."

## Closing remarks

According to Paul, the growing global population will require more protein to feed itself as it develops economically. "Food isn't going to become less important in the next 25 years.

"It's going to become more important and I think the UK in terms of its location, climate and expertise, is very well placed to continue to play a very

key role in feeding ourselves and others around the world," he said.

From Jon's perspective, he believes it's important to highlight that the UK farming community is doing a great job. "The food system isn't broken, it's feeding vast quantities of people and doing it in a responsible manner – environmentally-minded as well as production-minded."

To conclude with a different angle, Vicky stated that businesses should think about what their goals are, understand their own drivers and what matters to them. "Comparing that with where they are now, identifying the gaps in knowledge and consider what is necessary to measure progress," she said.

But for Philip, it's about being appropriate at all times. "Appropriate use of imports, appropriate protection of the environment, appropriate biodiversity, to name a few.

"I think at times we go off on a tangent and are quite extreme whereas we should capture what we want to do, appropriately." ■

## Real Results Roundtable

BASF's Real Results Circle is a UK-wide agricultural network now in its eighth year. The initiative is focused on bringing together growers, industry experts and BASF to create a more resilient farming system that's sustainable for farm business profit, for the people we feed and for the planet we live on.

Real Results Roundtable is a new initiative which explores related topics, such as resilient disease control, environmental stewardship and return on investment. Roundtables centre around Real Results Circle farmers and associated experts from the wider industry.

By coming together to openly discuss and therefore face challenges as one, we can find out what really works and help to shape the future of UK agriculture.

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