

## THE FARMERS' OUTLOOK CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



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SOIL ASSOCIATION



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Abi Reader  
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Sophie Throup  
MORRISONS



### World Agri-Tech Innovation Summit

Challenges and opportunities for sustainable agriculture was the topic of 'the farmers' outlook' at this year's World Agri-Tech Innovation Summit in London. CPM joined delegates to hear from some of the industry's leading voices.

By Janine Adamson

The annual World Agri-Tech Innovation Summit is badged as Europe's premier event for agri-food tech pioneers – a 'must-attend' for those invested in advancing nature-positive, resilient agriculture and food systems.

Despite much of the main stage line-up looking suspiciously corporate, this year's programme also included 'the farmers' outlook' – a session chaired by CEO of the Soil Association, Helen Browning.

Forming the panel was deputy

# Advancing agri-tech

president of NFU Cymru, Abi Reader; managing director of Dyson Farming, Daniel Cross; technical and sustainability director for manufacturing at Morrisons, Sophie Throup; and agricultural sustainability director of Lloyds Banking Group, Ben Makowiecki.

Helen opened the discussion by stating a farmer's role is changing due to being asked to undertake many other tasks beyond food production. "People are looking to farming and land as a solution to their problems. While we can do that, it's a changing environment – markets and the reward system are both still in flux.

"This means it's a tricky time to be a farmer and navigate the risks and opportunities as we strive to improve the sustainability of our sector."

### Challenges ahead

Turning to the panel, Helen asked Abi what she perceives to be the biggest challenges that agriculture currently faces. "There are two sides of the coin

– on one hand, farmers want some fresh concrete, decent mobile phone signal, pragmatic regulation and a fair price for the food they produce. But on the other hand, they want assistance to feed the world while sequestering its carbon. It's balancing

“People are looking to farming and land as a solution to their problems.”



According to Morrisons' Sophie Throup, one of the roles of a retailer is to understand what customers are looking for and practically support farmers to get there.

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*Incentives to implement sustainable approaches don't always reward the initial investment adequately, believes Dyson Farming's Daniel Cross.*

▶ those two sides which is really difficult," explained Abi.

To continue the discussion, Daniel stated that although there are a lot of challenges, there are also many opportunities. "What we're passionate about at Dyson is producing British food. In terms of food security, 54% of the food we eat is produced here which is just too low.

"Although consumers who want to buy British help to put value back into domestic food supply chain, it's balancing production with sustainability. I believe technology has the potential to play a very significant role in this."

### Technology rules

According to Daniel, appropriately deploying technology could help to make a considerable leap forward during the next 3-5 years. "But for us, it's about connecting with consumers – it's the people in the room who eat – so that's all of us – who decide

where to buy food from and how much to pay for it.

"If we can build connections better, that's the first step in starting to solve some of the bigger problems we face as an industry."

Sophie highlighted that Morrisons is different from other retailers because it has its own manufacturing arm which buys from farmers. "Although we're very close to the growers we purchase directly from, we're in the middle – trying to listen to those who supply us and also the customers who are demanding more sustainable products.

"However, people don't want to pay more for these items or spend time navigating to find them on the shelves. Customers rely on us to do the worrying for them and that's one of the roles of a retailer – to understand what customers are looking for and practically support farmers to get there," she said.

Ben pointed out that the role of banks is also changing. "It's easy to say let's lend money to farmers to use new technologies but actually, I don't think we can lend our way through this transition.

"UK farming has struggled with profitability during the past few years and will continue to do so – a lot of our farming customers are finding it hard to service the debt they already have without us burdening them with more.

"The part we can play is as conveners – we have 45,000 farming customers but also lend to clients throughout that supply chain. So it's bringing together all of those segments, top to bottom, to try and find common ground and a way to reward farmers for making the sustainable transition," he explained.

As the conversation shifted to the Sustainable



Farming Incentive (SFI), Daniel suggested it makes sense to maximise activities which are already taking place on farm to boost biodiversity and pollinators.

“But actions aren’t always accessible – one example we’ve been talking to the government about is precision spraying herbicides. Great, you can do that, but it costs around £500,000 for some kit meaning the incentive isn’t enough to make you want to invest. There are those kinds of disconnects which travel throughout government and policy.

“Because this isn’t something which changes quickly, it’s something we have to work with. So our focus at Dyson remains on getting food production right while undertaking appropriate science and research to understand what else we can do to go further and faster, while sharing that information with the wider industry.”

He added that there’s potential in cooperative models through sharing new technologies, equipment or skills. “Increasingly technology is being created for regions such as mid-west America, Russia or Ukraine

and it’d be impossible to use that future equipment in cereal crops in the UK.

“The worry is we’ll get left behind unless we find alternative solutions. So in the short-term, you can dilute the expense by sharing equipment and collaborating with neighbours which also helps to measure biodiversity by taking a wider perspective across a larger scale,” pointed out Daniel.

Ben continued the discussion by highlighting the positive impacts of regulation for growers. “As a bank, we have huge regulatory requirements for reporting which are in fact creating an opportunity for farmers through ‘carrots’ [incentives].

“We and others are providing these to try and spread the risk from farmers to the wider supply chain, to pay growers premiums for sustainable food. If we don’t do this, regulatory requirements become sticks rather than carrots so it’s important that payments incentivise and therefore minimise risk.”

### Proactive collaboration

According to Ben, for this to be a success, collaboration is required across the whole ▶



NFU Cymru’s Abi Reader said there’s a huge appetite among farmers to understand carbon and biodiversity stocks, but the basics have to be right including phone signal, broadband and reliable electricity.

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*Those who benefit from farmers being more sustainable should pay for it, said Ben Makowiecki from Lloyds Banking Group.*

► supply chain. “Those who benefit from farmers being more sustainable should pay for it. Supermarkets, processors, traders and banks should pay into a pot of money which rewards farmers for not only a single crop, but for holistic management across the whole rotation.

“Part of the problem with policy is it has a short-term approach which doesn’t even cover a cropping rotation, never mind a long-term strategy. One of our asks is for parties to work together to try and create a framework which lasts for 10, 20 or 50 years ideally, bringing together disparate parts of policy across the different governmental departments, the critical one being the Treasury,” he urged.

Sophie suggested there’s a role for government in standardising metrics and reporting. “Farmers have to feed data into several different supply chains and where possible, we should be trying to avoid duplication.

“Growers also require clarity on who owns the data – there has to be confidence and trust in this moving forward, which at the moment, can suppress the willingness to adopt innovation.”

Daniel added that it’s difficult for the government to change when it’s so short-term. “Consequently, we can’t expect the government and Defra to come up with many meaningful solutions. We have to collaborate and group together to do that, an example being the NFU.

“An interesting topic is government procurement – if you’re at school in the UK, you should be eating UK-produced food. It should also be mandatory for

supermarkets to declare the percentage of food that’s been sourced from the UK by volume and value, that’d be interesting and meaningful,” he said.

“During the past 30-40 years, supermarkets have used price as a key marketing mechanism not where food comes from or its nutritional quality. It’s been commoditised as boring food – we have to move away from that and be much more proud of what we produce here and communicate it.”

To provide a reality check, Abi stated although farmers would be proud to service public procurement, it’s not necessarily possible. “It’s a really low-value market; councils are under a lot of pressure. We also don’t have the processing facilities, at least in Wales, to deal with it.

“An example being, at least 80% of the potatoes which go into all Welsh schools are from the Netherlands because they have the processing facilities to peel, cook and prepare the meals. So when they arrive in Wales, they only take a minute to be heated up and cooked because schools don’t have adequate facilities. Unfortunately there are major processing and supply chain issues before we step into the world of supplying locally,” she stressed.

## Change required

In reflection, Ben suggested that although this might be the case, something has to change including greater incentives. “It can work, but it doesn’t work in our current paradigm where it isn’t valued,” he commented.

From Sophie’s perspective, the problem is rooted in a lack of connectivity. “As supermarkets, we’re a demand-led organisation and do what our customers want to do. But hey, let’s create the consumer pull to want more nutritious, British food.

“We have powerful voices through social media which has democratised communication – some farmers are incredibly good at it. There’s never been a time where farming is on TV as much as it is now; Jeremy Clarkson has done wonders.

“Use social media for the good to create that demand through knowledge into the effort that goes into producing food – that’s something all of us should be doing – driving passion, driving customers.”

When asked about what gets her

excited, Abi said there are many technologies which appeal, however sometimes, it’s the simple things. “It’s almost going back to the basics from the start before the microchips and data downloads – concrete, decent tyres and the ability to work your yard effectively to free up time to do the data management.

“There’s a huge appetite among farmers to understand carbon and biodiversity stocks but we have to get the basics right including phone signal, broadband, and reliable electricity,” she explained.

Daniel added that the aspect he finds most exciting right now is data. “We’re on the edge of being able to understand and make much better decisions which opens up a lot of transparency.

“For example, Dyson is embarking on a major project at the moment to digitise around 13,000ha to have better control of our inputs and calculate the impact we’re having nutritionally and from a biodiversity perspective.

“This will lead us to having less but more fit for purpose equipment while growing better quality, more nutritious crops,” he continued.

Daniel stressed that although there are good solutions on the market, often they’re for issues which are only half of a problem. “Digitising all of my agronomy sounds fantastic but right now we have a good agronomist who does that well. So does it stack up against the investment required?

“If you have the right data you stand a better chance of coordinating the smaller things which make more practical differences which can stack up to be game-changing.”

In response, Ben said it’s critical that farmers don’t have to produce more data. “The ideal would be one set of information and it sitting centrally for the likes of Sophie and I to extract what we require. This would have to be protected, but one set of standardised data would be great,” he pointed out.

To round up the discussion, Sophie said the ‘so what’ of data matters too. “Farmers run businesses which have to make money. So how does that data help them to make better business decisions rather than just provide what everyone else wants to know from them.

“That means growers feel incentivised to make changes which are right for their individual business model,” she concluded. ■