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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

# Food production and our rural environment – The way ahead

Edited by A Korbey

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# 1 Objectives in Food Production

C R W Spedding

A glance at the montage of headlines shown in Figure 1 illustrates that there *is* a problem and that it has been receiving a good deal of publicity.

Interests appear to be in conflict, one interest group attacks the other, generalisations are bandied about in a way that offends those who care by lumping them with those who do not, and there are assumptions that one side or other must be defeated or that a compromise has to be reached.

On the grounds that many problems appear insoluble because of the way that they are stated, it is worth standing back from the fray and re-examining the basis of the apparent conflict.

One way of analysing such a problem is to establish the objectives of each interest group and to examine to what extent they are shared and to what extent they are incompatible. There is no need to assume at the outset that conflict is inevitable and it is not very helpful to focus only on areas where conflict can be seen or imagined.

In clarifying objectives, just as in focussing on conflict, it is inaccurate as well as unhelpful to proceed as though all farmers are alike, any more than all environmentalists or all government officials are all alike. Very often, it is only what people are against that unifies them: there may be much less agreement about what they are *for*.

It may also be useful to depersonalise the debate somewhat. That is why the present discussion is concerned with food production, on the one hand, and our rural environment on the other. It may not be possible to avoid generalisations altogether but we can try to avoid generalising about people.

Figure 1

Objectives in Food Production (Montage of Press Headlines: Summer 1984)

# **'The rape of Britain**

**Anger grows  
as landscape  
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**Rare plants lost**

**Rare  
orchids  
plan is  
foiled**

**AA finds an enemy in the plough**

**New threat to wild wetland**

**'Farmers creating  
a prairie'**

**Moves  
to save  
wildlife  
sites**

**that must be reconciled  
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**Wanted: new  
rules for  
land use**

**Further and the country**

**Training in  
pesticides  
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**Conservation dilemma**

**'Greens' tie red  
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It is proposed then to consider, in turn, the objectives of food production and the objectives of rural development in relation to the environment.

## **THE OBJECTIVES OF FOOD PRODUCTION**

The first difficulty in following the plan just proposed is immediately apparent. The objectives of food production are not identical for all those involved: farmers, farm workers, government and agriculturally-related industries may all have their own different objectives. Indeed, since we are all consumers, all our different objectives for food production are relevant. But this is precisely the point. It is worth disentangling what is necessary or desirable for food production from the wishes of all those engaged in it. Any realistic assessment of the former must include the legitimate needs of the latter.

What then are the objectives of food production? The following list includes most of the more obvious objectives but their relative importance is a matter of individual judgement.

### **To provide such proportions of the nation's food supply as are judged desirable**

These proportions will vary from foodstuff to foodstuff, from time to time, with the costs of production and the costs of imports. They are only planned or nationally determined to the extent that subsidies or other incentives are provided to encourage production in certain directions. Since this objective is determined either by the government or the consumer, it should not be a matter of contention between farmers and environmentalists.

### **To produce food that is of a satisfactory quality**

People differ markedly in the criteria they apply to quality and their preferences, expressed as economic demand, determine what is produced and, often, how it is produced. Thus a marked preference for fruit without blemishes may lead to heavy use of chemical sprays.

Of general interest are criteria based on health grounds, either in relation to toxic residues or composition in terms of nutrients such as fat, fibre and sugar. Since between 75 and 80% of our foods are now processed, however, the food industry has a bigger influence on our diet than do farmers: and this may become increasingly the case.

### **To provide food efficiently, in economic terms**

Here there is always going to be a difference between producers, who have to make sufficient profit to continue in business, and consumers (including the food industry) who want low prices for their food or raw materials. But this is

no different from other supply/demand situations, except where unique subsidies or other reliefs are available.

As with any other business, there will be some who seek excessive profits or profits at any environmental cost. If necessary, controls have to be applied: but there is nothing inherently different in farming or inevitable about food production, in these respects.

The main attribute of food production that *is* relevant here, is its wide use of the land, that represents such a major part of everyone's environment.

### **To provide exports**

Not everyone will regard this as an agreed objective but there is no reason to constrain Agriculture in ways which do not apply to other industries (cars, steel, oil etc.).

It can be argued that, in an industry so dependent on the weather, the only way to guarantee "enough" (even as defined in Objective 1), even in the bad years, is to develop export outlets for the good years. Of course, successful exporting cannot be based on disposal of surpluses and may also require continuity of supply.

This is a complex matter but it is highly relevant and needs to be taken into account.

Food Aid is another form of exports. Many citizens simply cannot understand how it is possible to have surpluses in one part of the world and starvation in another, and are totally confused by public pronouncements on the subject. On the one hand, the Brandt Reports (Brandt, 1980, 1983) called for more food aid, whilst Jackson & Eade (1982) have described it as counter-productive.

However, the fact that food aid has a poor record (what form of aid does not?) and often causes corruption, distortion and dependence, whilst putting local producers out of business and not actually reaching the hungry, is not necessarily a sufficient reason for abandoning it. Many people simply find the present position intolerable and regard it as evidence that we have not yet got it right and ought to do better.

### **To contribute to rural life and employment**

This is not an unreasonable objective to require of all rural land-users. It can take many forms but the most contentious is probably employment. There is a widespread assumption (e.g. Wibberley, 1983) that farming cannot contribute significantly to increasing rural employment. Others (see Spedding, 1982) have suggested that we have not seriously explored the possibilities and that we should do so. Of course, increased employment would have to be paid for and would therefore have to increase output or reduce costs, inputs and wastage: but there



is scope for all of these (especially in terms of part-time employment) and some farmers are demonstrating this.

### **Care of the Environment**

Increasingly this is being seen as a proper objective of any land-using activity, including food production. Ways are being explored in which this objective can be made compatible with others, so that all can be achieved simultaneously. The conservation of wildlife is part of this objective.

### **Care of Farm Animals**

Responsibility for the care of farm animals has always been part of the farmers' role. What has changed in recent years has been the public's perception of this responsibility and what constitutes a satisfactory exercise of it.

The development of so-called factory farming (Bellerby 1970) and of intensive methods of poultry, pig and calf production, have led to public concern. The fact that it has often been articulated shrilly by extremists and has often appeared to farmers to be unfair and ill-informed, does not dispose of the issue.

The public are as entitled to concern about farm animals and the ways in which they are kept, as they are about cruelty to cats, dogs turned out onto motorways and ill-treatment of horses. All these things go on and have to be controlled.

Care of farm animals, as an objective, has to take account of Society's current view of what is acceptable and what is not.

None of these objectives raise problems, of themselves, and thus do not seem to be in conflict with those of other interests. Some conflicts will still occur, of course, due to individual abuses of the objectives and these must be dealt with by whatever means are judged to be effective and appropriate.

But it is wise to avoid the general curtailment of a freedom, simply in order to control abuses of it. On the other hand, of course, widespread abuse inevitably leads to wide-ranging controls.

In a similar fashion to the above, it is possible to consider the objectives of Rural Development and Care of the Environment.

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