

Land Use and Food Security Seminar

A seminar on Land Use and Food Security was held at Portcullis House on 13 July 2006, and was followed by tea in the House of Commons

It was a joint seminar with the Women's Food and Farming Union and the speakers were:

Baroness Hazel Byford DBE, Opposition Spokesperson for Food and Rural Affairs in the House of Lords

Henry Fell, Chairman of the Commercial Farmers Group

Sir Don Curry, Chairman of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy Implementation Group, Chairman of the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, and author of the Curry Report

Sir Stuart Hampson, Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership and Chairman of the Royal Agricultural Society

Baroness Byford started by saying that she had for some time now been promoting high quality traceable UK food and challenging the perception that cheap food is the only option. She wanted today for us to consider how we can take the arguments further and ensure that customers have relevant information upon which to make their choices.

She referred to a report of 'The Real Choice' about how local foods can survive the supermarket onslaught. The report shows how the local food economy underpins the economic viability of the countryside, through its market towns and villages and brings wider benefits to consumers and to the environment as a whole. (this theme was mentioned by all the other speakers).

Consumers should be able to make choices for themselves but those in favour of good traceable food should make their views known to the supermarkets. She praised shops like Waitrose and Marks and Spencer who are already taking part in this process

She posed a number of questions:

Does buying UK food matter?

Can we as individuals make a difference?

Do we care about our environment?

Does it matter that farming skills will decline and may be lost for ever?

Do we have a responsibility to future generations?

Should the labelling of food be more helpful. She would like to see clear, readable labelling on shelves as well as on products.

Should food, especially meat products, raised to a lower standard than in UK be banned? She referred to the recent concern about imported beef from cattle fed on growth hormones.

She commented that many British farmers suffer a financial disadvantage because they are over burdened with regulation and she would like to see them being more proactive in promoting themselves and the quality of their food.

She went on to express her concern about the ‘bigger picture’, the shortage of water, climate change and nitrate legislation all of which present a considerable challenge to the farming industry.

There is now a lively debate about organic versus commercial small versus large. The consumer should always have the choice. 75% of shoppers now choose to use supermarkets so the challenge to the farmer is to get the produce to the customers. Shoppers should always have the option of local food and producers fortunately now use various methods to provide this such as farmers markets, web-sites, agricultural shows etc. The options are there and those of us who support UK farmers must use them. If we do not, sooner or later we will be faced with a situation similar to the crisis which inspired the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign during the war!

The second speaker, **Henry Fell**, started with a quote from a Defra report in 2003 ‘National food security is neither necessary, nor is it desirable’ (Defra 2003). This, he maintains, is a belief that is at the centre of Government policy and sadly is a view held widely by political parties and consumer opinion.

UK self sufficiency in food has fallen from 87% in 1995 to 74% in 2004 and is falling at an accelerating rate. This is a result of short term, imprudent and ‘backyard’ thinking and if we allow it to continue it will create problems in the future.

He gave a number of reasons why there will be food shortages in the future;

- Global population increase and the link to changes in diet

- Climate change

- Shortage of water

- Risk of importing disease

- Food miles and the aggravation of pollution

- Dubious animal health and welfare regulation in other countries

He concentrated on the first three reasons.

World population has more than doubled since 1950, is now over 6 billion and is predicted to rise to 9 billion in 2050 (US Census bureau) All these people must be fed or we will have famine, mass migration and war. In addition, as standards of living rise, as for example in Asia and China, diets change from all cereal to an increasing dependence on meat, that, in turn, leads to an increase in cereal production to feed the animals. At the same time good agricultural land is being used for houses, industry etc, to cope with population increase, rain forests are being destroyed causing soil erosion, desert conditions are expanding and crop production is falling. He quoted the example of Ethiopia, a country he visits frequently. Current population is 73 million-predicted to rise to 170 million by 2050. This is a country that struggles to feed the present population.

The problem here, and in other African countries, is made worse by the Government schemes that give money to men to grow cash crops for export. The men use the fertile land close to the village previously used by the women growing vegetables to feed the families. The women are forced to the higher and poorer land which means fewer crops, more soil erosion and more problems in the future.

Climate change - global temperatures may rise 3-6 degrees in the next 100 years and this will require new land and food management strategies. It is essential that prudent

