

USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

# GAIN Report

Global Agricultural Information Network

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### **The UK's forthright Foresight Report**

**Report Categories:**

Food Security

Climate Change

Biotechnology and Other New Production

Technologies

Organic Products

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**Report Highlights:**

The UK government has released a much anticipated report that calls on policy makers around the world to transform the food system and effect radical change 'on industrial revolution scale'. The report is the culmination of a two-year study, involving 400 experts from 35 countries, and is much more forthright than ever before on contentious agriculture and food topics. Support for new technologies is upfront, as is the need to promote sustainable intensification of production, and for developed economies to consider managing their meat consumption. The contribution of the organic sector is duly noted, while also indicating its limitations in sustainably feeding a growing population. Interested parties may also want to read the insightful sections on reform of agricultural subsidies, preparing for food price fluctuation and stemming biodiversity loss. Growing more food, on the same land, at less cost to the environment is by now a familiar theme, but this report calls for policy makers across the globe to act now and muster strength to take what may be very difficult decisions.

## **General Information:**

**Background:** *Foresight. The Future of Food and Farming (2011)* is the product of a two-year study, involving 400 experts from 35 countries, by Foresight – the UK government’s futures ‘think tank’. Co-commissioned by the UK’s Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Department for International Development, the project was overseen by the UK’s Chief Science Adviser, Sir John Beddington. The U.S. provided input primarily through Dr. Nina Fedoroff, former Special Advisor on Science and Technology to the U.S. Department of State via membership of the High-Level Stakeholder Group. Other U.S. contributors included USDA’s Economic Research Service, as well as Iowa State, Stanford, and Yale Universities.

**Recommendations and Conclusions:** A major conclusion of the report is the critical importance of interconnected policy-making. It spells out that food security is inextricably linked with seemingly diverse issues from poverty and economic growth, to water and energy shortages, to climate change and biodiversity loss. Sir John Beddington says that “The world has not recognized that this linking is essential” to meeting the challenge of feeding 2 billion more people by 2050 but with less environmental impact. The report calls for food policy to be developed in much closer conjunction with policy in areas such as energy, water, land use, the sea, ecosystem services and biodiversity. It also suggests that action is needed on all of the following four fronts simultaneously:

- More food must be produced sustainably through the spread and implementation of existing knowledge, technology and best practice, and by investment in new science and innovation and the social infrastructure that enables food producers to benefit from all of these.
- Demand for the most resource-intensive types of food must be contained.
- Waste in all areas of the food system must be minimized.
- The political and economic governance of the food system must be improved to increase food system productivity and sustainability.

## **Key excerpts from the report:**

New technologies (such as genetic modification of living organisms and the use of cloned livestock and nanotechnology) should not be excluded *a priori* on ethical or moral grounds, though there is a need to respect the views of people who take a contrary view [**Page 11, Box 1.2**]. Achieving a strong evidence base in controversial areas is not enough to obtain public acceptance and approval – genuine public engagement and discussion need to play a critical role [**Page 13**].

Food security is best served by fair and fully functioning markets and not by policies to promote self-sufficiency. However, placing trust in the international system does not mean relinquishing a country’s sovereignty, rights and responsibilities to provide food for its population. Greater powers need to be given to international institutions to prevent trade restrictions at times of crisis [**Page 19**].

An essential first step towards a more equitable global trading system for poor agricultural producers is the realization of a *genuinely* pro-development Doha Development Agenda agreement via the negotiations of

the World Trade Organization [**Page 20**].

It has been argued that a reduction in the amount of meat consumed in high- and middle-income countries would have multiple benefits: a reduced demand for grain, leading to lower greenhouse gas emissions, and a positive effect on health. . . . policy makers should recognize that more proactive measures affecting the demand and production of meat may be required should current trends in global consumption continue to rise [**Page 22**].

Targeted food reserves for vulnerable (typically low-income) countries should be considered. There is a strong case for establishing an emergency food reserve and financing facility for the World Food Programme to help low-income countries facing sudden increases in food import bills when price spikes occur [**Page 24**].

There are grounds for optimism that agriculture can become a more powerful force for the reduction of hunger and poverty in the decades ahead – but agriculture needs to be repositioned within governments as a profession dedicated to multiple ends, of which hunger and poverty reduction are central [**Page 25**].

There is a widespread consensus on the causes of hunger: for people to be free of hunger, there has to be physical, economic and social access to food. However, interventions will require the deliberate generation of a more robust and consistent consensus on tackling hunger. Strong levels of political courage and leadership will be required to carry this through [**Page 25**].

Senior representatives of the UK food retail sector gave the clear message that they would welcome government accredited national schemes that set standards for sustainability [**Page 31**].

It follows that if (i) there is relatively little new land for agriculture, (ii) more food needs to be produced and (iii) achieving sustainability is critical, then sustainable intensification is a priority [**Page 35**].

The Report concludes that organic agriculture as currently codified should not be adopted as the main strategy to achieve sustainable and equitable global food security. . . . The universal adoption of organic agriculture would close off too many important approaches, though the wider application of specific practices will make a significant contribution to integrated and sustainable approaches to food production [**Page 82**].

The *Field to Market* initiative run by *The Keystone Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture* is a US-based organization bringing together producers including large agribusiness, food companies and environmental groups to develop more sustainable food supply chains. The alliance has developed a series of metrics for quantifying the sustainability of agricultural systems. It is possible that such systems may one day be used to reward more sustainable farming systems in terms of receiving carbon credits and other incentives for sustainable growth [**Page 101**].

**Comment:** Coming within a year of a new UK coalition government (noticeably quiet on several policy fronts such as biotechnology), this report will provide the basis for UK politicians to move forward on food and farm policy, as well as seeking to influence policy further afield.

The full report, along with the underpinning technical science reviews, working papers and workshop reports can be accessed here: <http://www.bis.gov.uk/foresight/our-work/projects/current-projects/global-food-and-farming-futures/reports-and-publications>

