

The case for an Organic Action Plan for England

Summary

- As the gold standard for sustainable farming, underpinned by a thorough set of legal standards, organic farming is key to supporting the UK government's climate and nature objectives while supporting healthy and nutritious food production.
- Organic systems are particularly relevant to the government's apex target to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, as they increase species richness by 30% and species abundance by 50%, on average.
- As it stands, the UK is falling far behind our European neighbours, with just 3% of our farmland being managed organically, despite growing demand for organic produce.
- A cross-cutting, government-backed **Organic Action Plan** (OAP) is needed to provide strategic direction to the sector, and unlock the environmental, economic, and public health benefits of organic production.
- At a time of budget constraints, government support for organic via an OAP could deliver a significant return on investment, making progress on climate and nature goals while meeting market demand and building farm business resilience.
- As a member of the English Organic Forum, the Soil Association would welcome the opportunity to help co-design this plan, and coordinate input from the wider sector.

Why organic?

Organic farming systems have been shown to deliver multiple environmental benefits, supporting a broad range of UK government objectives, including:

Biodiversity

While the use of agrochemicals is increasingly evidenced as a leading factor for the decline in insect and bird populations,^{1 2} organic farming prohibits the use of synthetic inputs, encouraging farmers to harness the natural resilience of a healthy ecosystem. As a result, when compared with conventional practices organic has been found to increase **species richness by**

¹ Gandara, L. et al (2024) Pervasive sublethal effects of agrochemicals on insects at environmentally relevant concentrations. *Science*, 386, 446-453. DOI: [10.1126/science.ado0251](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ado0251)

² Rigal, S. et al (2023) Farmland practices are driving bird population decline across Europe. *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, 120 (21) e2216573120 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216573120>

30%,³ and species abundance by 50%, on average.⁴ Farmers such as Jim Dufosse at Farnicombe Farm in Wiltshire illustrate the unique ability of organic farming to reconcile food production with nature recovery, having recorded 32 red list species across his farm – from hen harriers to skylarks, polecats and brown hares.⁵

Organic farms can, therefore, play a critical role in supporting the UK government’s legally binding nature restoration targets, set out in the Environment Act and the Environmental Improvement Plan, as well as the international commitments to reduce threats to biodiversity set out in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Water quality

Just 15% of English rivers are in good ecological health,⁶ and agriculture is a key contributor to their pollution.⁷ A shift to nature-friendly farming practices which limit water pollution will be vital to achieving the UK government’s water quality targets, as well as supporting Defra’s wider ambition to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas.

By closing nutrient cycles and prohibiting the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, organic farming prevents the runoff of these chemical inputs into our water courses. Similarly, the higher levels of soil surface vegetation cover associated with organic practices help to reduce the risk of erosion and the associated sediment pollution.⁸ As such, organic farming is a key tool in supporting water quality - countries such as France have successfully prioritised organic practices in areas with water quality challenges, to help prevent diffuse agricultural pollution.⁹

Soil health and climate adaptation

Other key benefits of organic farming include improved soil health and soil biodiversity,¹⁰ which in turn promote climate adaptation. Healthy, biodiverse soils are more adaptable to

³ Tuck, S.L., Winqvist, C., Mota, F., Ahnström, J., Turnbull, L.A. and Bengtsson, J. (2014), *Land-use intensity and the effects of organic farming on biodiversity: a hierarchical meta-analysis*. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 51: 746-755. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1365-2664.12219>

⁴ Tschardtke, T., et al (2021), Beyond organic farming – harnessing biodiversity-friendly landscapes. *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 30 (10) 919-930. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2021.06.010>

⁵ Defra (2024) Test and Trial 068a, produced by the Soil Association and the Organic Research Centre.

⁶ The Rivers Trust (2024) State of our Rivers report, available here: <https://theriverstrust.org/key-issues/state-of-our-rivers>

⁷ House of Lords Library, in focus (2024) River pollution and the regulation of private water companies. Available here: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/river-pollution-and-the-regulation-of-private-water-companies/#heading-4>

⁸ Seitz, S. et al. (2019) Conservation tillage and organic farming reduce soil erosion. *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* **39**, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-018-0545-z>

⁹ Vincent, A. and Fleury, P. (2015) Development of organic farming for the protection of water quality: Local projects in France and their policy implications. *Land Use Policy*, 43, 197-206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2014.10.020>

¹⁰ Henneron, L., et al (2015) Fourteen years of evidence for positive effects of conservation agriculture and organic farming on soil life. *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* **35**, 169–181. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-014-0215-8>

environmental stressors, such as drought, flooding, and extreme temperatures, and less vulnerable to animal and human pathogens.¹¹

Organic systems have been found to enhance microbial abundance and activity in soils across the globe,¹² as well as supporting significantly higher levels of soil organic carbon than in conventional systems - a central characteristic of soil fertility, as it improves soil structure, aeration and water-holding capacity.¹³ By supporting healthy, living soils, organic farming is therefore central to protecting the resilience and productivity of our farming systems, contributing to long-term food security.

Animal welfare

Animal welfare requirements are central to organic standards, which represent some of the highest standards for animal welfare of any farming system in the UK.

The focus of organic systems is to have living conditions (both when housed and free-ranging outside) that support animals to be healthy and meet all their essential needs, but above that provide the space and interest for them to satisfy all the things they want and enjoy doing, specifically supporting essential natural behaviours.

By providing the space and enriched environments that animals feel comfortable and satisfied in, organic farmers can minimise stress and associated unwanted behaviours - like tail biting in pigs or feather pecking in hens - so animals don't need to undergo painful mutilations that mitigate against these abnormal behaviours, such as tail docking and beak trimming.

Furthermore, organic standards prohibit routine antibiotic use and preventative antibiotic use in the absence of surgical intervention. As a result, antibiotic use is much lower in organic farming.¹⁴

Financial resilience

The farming sector's heavy reliance on fossil fuel-derived fertilisers leaves many farm businesses exposed to market volatility. Following the invasion of Ukraine, for example, farmers are estimated to have spent around £1.42 billion on fertiliser in 2022, compared to £470m spent in 2020.¹⁵ This fluctuation of input costs has been identified as having a greater impact on food

¹¹ Eisenhauer N., et al (2024) A belowground perspective on the nexus between biodiversity change, climate change, and human well-being. *J Sustain Agric Environ.* 3:212108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sae2.12108>

¹² Lori, M et al (2017) Organic farming enhances soil microbial abundance and activity—A meta-analysis and meta-regression. *PLoS ONE* 12(7): e0180442. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0180442>

¹³ Rööös, E. et al (2018) Risks and opportunities of increasing yields in organic farming. A review. *Agron. Sustain. Dev.* 38, 14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-018-0489-3>

¹⁴ Alliance to Save our Antibiotics (2021) Antibiotic use in organic farming: Lowering use through good husbandry. [Available here.](#)

¹⁵ ECIU (2024) British farmers hit by £1.4 billion fertiliser bill since Russian invasion of Ukraine, with costs set to stay high. [Available here.](#)

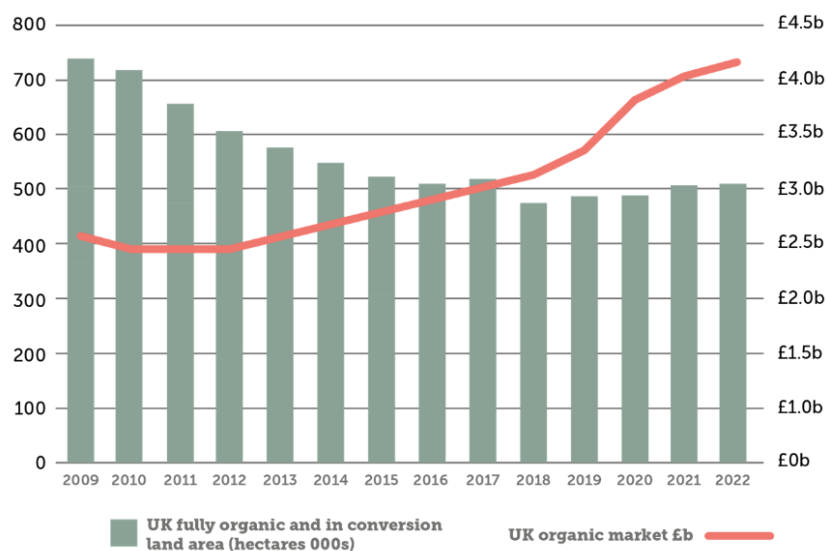
prices than the curtailment of Russian and Ukrainian exports, and is therefore considered a driving cause of food insecurity.¹⁶

By reducing their reliance on external inputs – and avoiding synthetic fertilisers altogether – organic farmers are shielded from disruptions to global markets and supply chains. A less input dependent food system will be vital for protecting the long-term resilience of farm businesses, and national food security.

A missed opportunity for domestic production?

Despite the key advantages of organic farming – and a growing market for organic products, worth £3.2 billion in 2023 – the percentage of organic land share has remained largely static in England, representing just 3% of the country’s farmed area.¹⁷ As a result, there is a heavy reliance on imports to meet the growing demand for organic products, meaning that many farmers are currently missing out on the potential benefits organic can bring to their business – and the UK landscape in turn is missing out on the environmental benefits delivered by organic systems.

Comparison of UK sales growth of organic products (£ billion) to change in organic land (hectares 000s)



Source: DEFRA Organic Farming Statistics 2022 (June Survey of Agriculture as at 1 June. Excludes common land)

In comparison, the EU already has an average of 10% organic farmland, with targets to increase that figure to 25% by 2030 set out in the Farm to Fork Strategy,¹⁸ alongside a clear recognition of

¹⁶ Alexander, P. et al (2023) High energy and fertilizer prices are more damaging than food export curtailment from Ukraine and Russia for food prices, health and the environment. *Nat Food* 4, 84–95. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-022-00659-9>

¹⁷ Defra (2023) Organic Farming Statistics: England. [Available here](#).

¹⁸ https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/farm-fork-strategy_en

the widespread benefits of organic reflected in the European Commission’s Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture.¹⁹ An increase in organic production on British soils will be essential to avoid offshoring these environmental and economic benefits overseas.

Why an Organic Action Plan?

Organic Action Plans (OAPs) have been initiated across Europe and in other parts of the world since the 1990s, bringing together a range of policy measures aimed at encouraging greater production and consumption of organic food, as well as expanding the market for organic products.

While the content and implementation of OAPs can vary, successful OAPs have helped to secure long-term, sustainable growth in the organic sector. A recent study analysing the impact of four different national action plans (French, Swedish, Austrian and Czech) concludes that as a policy tool, OAPs are likely to boost the development of the organic sector, particularly if the existing uptake of organic production is lower than its potential.²⁰

Another success story is reflected by Ireland’s Organic Strategies (2019-2015²¹ and 2024-2030²²), which set the ambition of expanding organic farming to 10% of the country’s land area by 2030. While just 1.6% of country’s land was farmed organically in 2020, this grew to 5% by 2023, accompanied by a threefold increase in organic farm numbers.

Given the growing gap between the organic market and organic production in England, a government-backed OAP is desperately needed to secure a thriving future for the organic sector - and unlocking the associated economic, environmental and public health benefits.

What should an English OAP include?

Experience from other countries suggests there are key elements of successful OAPs that can be identified and replicated in other countries, including: clear financial commitments; the use of targets to motivate key actors; ownership and accountability for actions; robust monitoring and evaluation; capacity building in organic NGOs and partnership working between the public and private sector.

A national target to increase organic farmland to **10% of the farmed landscape by 2030** would deliver significant benefits for the environment, public health, and the resilience of farm businesses.

With this in mind, the English Organic Forum (EOF) has already developed a Programme of Work (PoW), through a process of co-design with Defra and representatives of the organic sector. It

¹⁹ European Commission (2024) Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture. Available here: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/171329ff-0f50-4fa5-946f-aea11032172e_en?filename=strategic-dialogue-report-2024_en.pdf

²⁰ Rees, C., Grovermann C., Finger, R. (2023) *National organic action plans and organic farmland area growth in Europe*, Food Policy, 121:102531, 0306-9192, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102531>.

²¹ Ireland’s National Organic Strategy 2019-2025: <https://www.irishorganicassociation.ie/wp-content/uploads/National-Organic-Strategy-2019-2025.pdf>

²² Ireland’s National Organic Strategy 2024-2023: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/305309/efc858ad-0c69-47ee-9c4a-73045c380168.pdf#page=null>

sets out four key themes for the sector's development - support and stimulation of organic production; organic market development; developing organic farming practice for environmental, climate adaptation and productivity goals; and developing organic regulation and ensure equivalence - as well as a set of actions, with ownership allocated to Defra, the organic sector, or shared.

As such, the foundation for a successful OAP for England already exists, and as part of the EOF the Soil Association would be delighted to build on this work to help create a clear and ambitious OAP for England.

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