“Should UK farmers play a part in meeting UK government goals on climate change?”

The verdict of a specially-convened Farmers’ Jury

Short report – April 2025

Conducted with the support of the AFN Network+

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Summary

In February 2025, the AFN Network+ brought 16 farmers and land managers together from across the UK for a unique experiment: to use a 'Farmers' Jury' to better understand farmers' perspectives on reaching 'Net Zero' and explore views on what agriculture's responsibilities are to act on climate change.

UK government has legally committed to Net Zero by 2050. While there is currently no statutory target for agriculture, a 45% reduction budgeted for the sector has placed growing pressure on farmers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Some organisations and supply chains are even communicating that the sector or even individual producers are expected to reach Net Zero. Many farmers have questioned this singular focus on emissions and the feasibility of proposed interventions to reduce them to Net Zero, leading to a lack of engagement.

Over two days the Farmers' Jury explored the arguments in this debate. They heard then discussed presentations from over 20 specialists in fields ranging from policy to climate science and land use, before reaching an agreed position on the following 'charge':

"Should UK farmers, growers and land managers play a part in meeting UK government goals on climate change and nature recovery?

"If so, what does that 'part' look like?

"And if engagement in moving towards a 'Net Zero' goal is to increase—or be maximised—among UK farmers, what needs to change, how does it change, and who changes it?"

Summary

The Jury of 16 farmers found:-

- UK farmers and land managers should play a part in meeting government climate change ambitions—but Net Zero is the wrong target for farming: it's unachievable, demotivating, ill-suited to farming, and forces foreseen and undesirable trade-offs.
- Goals must focus on outcomes, not prescriptive actions.
- Farmers are best positioned to deliver integrated land management solutions that balance food security, water, nature, health, innovation, and climate.
- Collaboration is essential, requiring shifts in mindset, language, and communication between farmers and all in government and the food supply chain.
- While political dialogue is important, relationships between government and farmers have become politicised, preventing policy being grounded in practical reality.
- A reimagined, independent food chain forum encompassing relevant government departments should give grassroots farmers more voice in shaping new goals.
- A four-nation 'cluster group' network (eg, demonstration farms, monitor farm networks) could facilitate government-farmer dialogue, offering government teams the opportunity to try new ideas, consult and disseminate information.
- Engagement barriers must be addressed, including methane accounting disputes, inconsistent measurement methods, limited technology funding, and unregulated carbon markets.
- Farmers must be more proactive in driving change—they will be central to improving the food system for everyone, including themselves, consumers and government.

This approach aims to move beyond stalemates, fostering solutions that are practical, collaborative, and effective in achieving a wide range of shared goals.

1. Background

Commitments on carbon

The UK has adopted a legally binding target to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions across the whole economy to zero by 2050. There is currently no statutory target for the agricultural sector, but the Climate Change Committee's recent advice to government in its Seventh Carbon Budget (February 2025) is that emissions from agriculture should fall from 47.7 Mt CO_2e (mega tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent) in 2022 to 26.4 Mt CO_2e in 2050, a reduction of some 45%.

This means that although agriculture is still expected to be producing emissions by the time we reach 2050, farmers face growing pressure to adopt a range of measures to curb output in the run up to this point.

Agriculture's role in climate change

However, many in farming question the current approach, including the validity of the accounting methods used to measure agriculture's emissions and the feasibility of the interventions proposed. Methane from ruminants is a particular point of disagreement: it is many times more warming than carbon dioxide yet short-lived in nature, making rapid reductions both possible and attractive; yet it is an integral part of the (natural) carbon cycle and as such, does not accumulate in the atmosphere to create warming in the same way as carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide.

Concerns over the common interventions proposed for farming highlight the consequential dangers of focusing solely on emissions reduction. For example, genetic modification of plants could reduce fertiliser use but create a consumer backlash. Removal of ruminants purely on the basis of their methane output reduces opportunities for multi-functional landscapes meeting a range of needs. Intensive production lowers emissions per unit but sparks animal welfare debates. Feed additives cut methane but may damage consumer confidence in a product's wholesomeness. Additionally, some solutions require a long-term investment in technology that many farmers are ill-placed to afford.

Overcoming polarised views

As a result of some of these differing views on agriculture's role in climate change, positions have become increasingly polarised, creating a stand-off and slowing the adoption of solutions that enhance efficiency, profitability, and climate resilience while reducing emissions. Defra's annual Farm Practices Survey reflects this stasis, showing a declining priority placed on greenhouse gas emissions by English farmers over the past three years.

Social science research suggests conflict can be eased through mutual understanding and collaboration, allowing the co-design of workable and effective solutions. This approach has already proven effective in UK farming, as seen in the successful effort to halve antibiotic use in livestock within five years. A similar strategy could help address agricultural emissions by fostering cooperation and identifying shared solutions.

The question is whether such an approach could work in this area. Are farming communities and governments receptive to such an approach? And if so, are they open to adjusting their positions as part of this process—and what could co-designed solutions look like? These are the questions this exercise set out to explore.

2. Approach

What is a Citizens' Jury?

The Citizens' Jury model was first developed in the 1970s by the Jefferson Center in the US, and has since been adapted by various organisations to address challenging public policy issues. A typical Citizens' Jury consists of 12 to 24 randomly selected individuals, forming a representative panel that examines a topic in depth.

Because many policy issues are complex, Citizen Jurors—who are non-experts—need time to understand the nuances. For this reason, Citizens' Juries usually run for three to six days, during which Jurors receive a stipend for their participation. They hear from a diverse range of expert witnesses, ask questions, and then deliberate on the key issue—or 'charge'—posed at the start. By the final day, the Jury reaches a collective decision and presents its recommendations.

The Power of the Citizens' Jury

Citizens' Juries help resolve seemingly intractable debates by introducing nuance and encouraging open-minded discussion. They create space for polarised perspectives to shift, helping participants find common ground. Most importantly, they give voice to ordinary citizens, enabling them to propose solutions rather than simply accept decisions imposed from above.

The climate change debate in agriculture is a prime example of an issue that could benefit from such a process. Although farmers are not 'non-experts' in this topic, they often feel misunderstood as 'contributors' to climate change or overlooked in policy decisions. Scientific disagreements fuel frustration on both sides, even when each perspective is backed by valid research.

The Farmers' Jury Experiment

To explore these tensions, an industry-wide survey ran from November 2024 to January 2025, asking farmers their perceptions of climate change and the interventions they are being asked to adopt. As part of this, farmers were invited to participate in a Farmers' Jury to delve deeper into the issues and identify potential solutions.

Out of 400+ farmers surveyed, over 100 expressed an interest. After further screening for diversity in farm type, size, and enterprise, 20 candidates were selected, with 16 committing to taking part.

2. Approach

Between 24 and 26 February 2025, these 16 farmers gathered in London to hear expert presentations and discussed agriculture's transition to lower emissions. More than 20 specialists in policy, climate science, technology and land use provided insights before the Jury deliberated on the charge and reached a consensus.

Key Differences from a Traditional Citizens' Jury

Due to time constraints and the unique nature of the project, the Farmers' Jury differed from a standard Citizens' Jury in several ways:

- **Participant Selection:** Traditional Citizens' Juries select participants to ensure a balance of perspectives, whereas the Farmers' Jury was composed of volunteers–albeit from a wide range of geographies and enterprises, and having a broad range of views.
- **Subject Knowledge:** Unlike typical jurors, who start with little prior knowledge, these farmers brought existing expertise—and vested interests—to the discussion.

Despite these differences, the process was highly valued by participants. They especially appreciated the opportunity to understand the different perspectives behind policy and the access to senior decision-makers. This highlights the potential of such approaches to foster constructive dialogue in agriculture in the future.

Organisers & Funding

Amy Jackson organised and ran the event as part of her role with the UKRI Agri-food for Net Zero Network+ (AFN Network+ agrifood4netzero.net). The AFN Network+ is a three-year programme driving agri-food sector progress toward Net Zero, and Amy is an AFN Network+ Champion specialising in Behaviour Change, who spearheaded the effort as part of her work exploring barriers to farmer engagement.

The AFN Network+ funded the majority of the event, with additional support from Food & Farming Futures (farmpep.net/FFF), an independent charity developing The National Libraries for AgriFood to promote more efficient, sustainable supply chains.

3. The Charge

The charge, or question, the Jury considered throughout proceedings so that it could agree a response at the conclusion was as follows:

1

Should UK farmers, growers and land managers play a part in meeting UK government goals on climate change and (as an associated issue) nature recovery?

2

If so, what does that 'part' look like?

3

If engagement in moving towards a 'Net Zero' goal is to increase – or be maximised – among UK farmers:

a. what needs to change

b. how does it change

c. and who changes it?

4. The Jurors

Sixteen farmers, growers and food producers participated in the Farmers' Jury. In a typical Citizens' Jury, the jurors would be selected through stratified random sampling. Although this Jury was a 'convenience sample' of willing volunteers, it was as diverse as possible in terms of location, enterprise type, farm size and ownership, and members held a broad range of views on the issue of climate change and emissions.

Name	County	Enterprises	Land	Farmed area
Adrian Ivory	Perthshire	Beef and arable	Owner	500 to <1,000ha
Angus Dalton	Derbyshire	Dairy (retail), beef and sheep	Tenant	100 to <500ha
Cath Morley	Lancashire	Dairy	Part owner/ part tenant	100 to <500ha
Ian Powell	Monmouthshire	Sheep, Beef, Poultry, Pigs, Retail	Part owner/ part tenant	50 to <100ha
James Barber	Northumberland	Beef, sheep and arable	Part owner/ part tenant	500 to <1,000ha
James Rimmer	East Yorkshire	Arable	Farm Manager	500 to <1,000ha
Liz Warner	Devon	Beef and arable	Tenant	50 to <100ha
Nat Marsden	Lancashire	Beef and sheep	Part owner/ part tenant	100 to <500ha
Penny Chantler	Herefordshire	Sheep	Part owner/ part tenant	500 to <1,000ha
Peter McAllister	Antrim	Beef and sheep	Part owner/ part tenant	20 to <50ha
Robert Thornhill	Derbyshire	Dairy	Owner	100 to <500ha
Stuart Dainton	Leicestershire	Dairy, beef, sheep, orchards and forestry	Land manager	500 to <1,000ha
Thomas Gent	Cambridgeshire	Arable and poultry, insect farming	Part owner/ part tenant	500 to <1,000ha
Tom Johnston	Cumbria	Mixed cattle and arable	Owner	100 to <500ha
Tony Pexton	North Yorkshire	Pigs and arable	Owner	100 to <500ha
Trevor Bosomworth	North Yorkshire	Arable & horticulture/ fresh produce	Part owner/ part tenant	100 to <500ha

5. The Jury Sessions

Time	Subject	Expert witness/es
DAY 1	**SESSION 1: ABOUT THE BASICS**	
8.30-9.00	**Introduction**	Amy Jackson, AFN Network+ (Moderator)
9.00-10.25	**Setting the scene**	Karen Lepper & Harley Stoddart, Defra; David Webster, LEAF
10.40-11.20	**About the MACC model**	Dr Vera Eory, Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)
11.20-12.00	**Baselining/ soil carbon**	Chris Gooderham, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)
12.00-12.30	**Accounting for gases**	Andrew Loftus, Loftus Farms/ National Farmers Union (NFU)
	SESSION 2: TOOLS FOR CHANGE – COSTS & OTHER BENEFITS	
13.30-14.00	**The role of technology**	Claire Hodge, Agri-Tech Centre
14.00-14.40	**Opportunities & risk on-farm**	George Peart, Promar
14.40-15.00	**Can animal breeding help?**	Marco Winter, Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)
15.00-15.30	**The potential for trees**	Jim O'Neill, Forestry Commission
15.30-15.45	**Extra discussion**	
16.00-17.00	**Nature markets & renewables**	James Attrill, BCM Wilson Hill
	SESSION 3: THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE	
17.00-17.30	**The retailer perspective**	Sophie Throup, Myton Food Group
17.30-17.45	**Discussion**	
Over dinner	**Plant breeding: What's coming down the tracks?**	Tom Allen-Stevens, British On-Farm Innovation Network (BOFIN)

5. The Jury Sessions

Time	Subject	Expert witness/es
DAY 2	**SESSION 3: THE WIDER PERSPECTIVE, CONTINUED**	
9.00-9.30	**Citizens and consumers**	Mhairi Brown, Food, Farming & Countryside Commission (FFCC)
9.30-10.30	**Path to Net Zero**	David Kennedy, Ernst Young (EY) / Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi) & Kirsty Saddler, Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD)
10.45-12.30	**Policy – helping or hindering?**	Matthew Doran, Country Land & Business Association (CLA - UK/England & Wales) Martin Kennedy, Lurgan Farm, Co-Chair of the Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board (ARIOB - Scotland) Alistair Craig, Carsehall Farm & Robert Moore, Molenan Estate (NI) Georgie Barber, Food, Farming & Countryside Commission (UK)
	SESSION 4: JURY DELIBERATION & VERDICT	
12.35-12.45	**Instructions to Jury**	
13.00-16.00	**Jury deliberation**	
16.00-17.00	**Verdict and discussion**	

6. The Jurors' Verdict

Should UK farmers, growers and land managers play a part in meeting UK government goals on climate change and (as an associated issue) nature recovery?

UK farmers, growers and land managers (henceforth 'farmers') should play a part in meeting government goals on climate change and nature recovery: ambitious government plans cannot be achieved without farmers delivering 'on the ground'.

If so, what does that 'part' look like?

UK agriculture has the ability and willingness to be the voice for balanced integrated land management—for food security, water, nature, health, innovation and climate adaptation—which can then feed into policy and regulation. However, engagement from all parties and 'joined up thinking' is integral to this.

If engagement in moving towards a Net Zero goal is to increase among UK farmers... What needs to change?

a) **The goal**—Net Zero is the wrong ambition for agriculture:

- **Achievability:** It is largely unachievable for farms as individual businesses, and so has a perverse impact on engagement.
- **Accounting:** Current accounting methods do not permit agriculture as a sector to reach Net Zero: carbon 'removals' achieved by farmers through above or below ground storage or renewable energy generation are credited into other sectors.

6. The Jurors' Verdict

- **Trade-offs:** As a single metric, Net Zero–or emissions reduction more generally–creates the potential for significant trade-offs in other areas including local air and water quality, biodiversity, animal welfare, and economic and social sustainability.
- **Gas balance:** The balance of greenhouse gases that farming and land management generates is very different from any other sector, with particularly high levels of methane and nitrous oxide and low levels of carbon dioxide (CO_2).
- **Methane:** Methane emissions in particular are very short-lived, and are related to and governed by natural cycles, demanding a different approach from the CO_2-dominated Net Zero.

b) Our mindsets—A can-do, collaborative approach is needed from all parties:

- **Shared understanding:** A change of mindset from problem-seeking to solution-funding starts with a full appreciation of the challenges each party faces and the wider impacts of any decision-making. That includes an understanding of the challenges facing governments and supply chains.
- **Co-design:** While a desire for co-design has been expressed by Defra and UK government, this risks the appearance of tokenism without genuine collaboration at grassroots to both define the challenge as well as design outcome-based solutions.

c) Communication—A more productive dialogue is needed between and across governments and farmers to develop sound policies that deliver the desired outcomes:

- **Tone:** Language and attitude is currently combative, when both farmers and government should be generating trust to support collaboration and co-design.
- **'Ground-truthing':** The outcome of all these barriers to dialogue is a failure to ground policy in practical reality so that it is adopted and delivers as intended.
- **Politicisation:** Government consultation with farmers is heavily mediated through the farming unions—a situation farmers themselves have created. While this addresses

political or lobbying needs of the farming sector, it does not always satisfy practical or technical needs of farmers on the ground—and can politicise otherwise apolitical issues.

- **Connectivity:** Government appears to work in silos, whether: between country (England versus devolved nations despite inextricable ongoing links); between departments (particularly Defra versus DBT—regarding support for the UK food and drink sector, DESNZ—renewable energy generation, DHSC—health, DfE—education, and MoD—(food) security; or within Defra (Net Zero, Environment, Biodiversity, Agri-food Chain). This is despite farming, by its nature, having inter-dependencies across a range of other disciplines that demand a holistic approach.

...How does it change?

d) **Strategic 'table'**—Independent grassroots farmers need be 'at the table' as part of a trusted food chain forum covering both UK-wide and English issues, and therefore including lead government ministers and senior civil servants from impacted departments and other industry stakeholders. If that 'table' does not currently exist, the UK agricultural community should be proactive in creating it; ARIOB in Scotland provides a useful starting model. This group should re-articulate the goal for farming.

e) **Delivery 'sandpit'**—A four-nation network of 'cluster groups' (eg, comprising monitor farm networks, demonstration farms, discussion groups etc) should be developed so government teams can confidently air ideas and consult within a safe space. Equally, this offers an opportunity for farmers to provide input to government decisions then disseminate information back to others in their networks.

f) **Removal of engagement 'roadblocks'**—Including but not limited to:

- **Methane:** Accelerate a move to a dual accounting system (involving both GWP100 and GWP*) to ensure each gas can be treated appropriately.

- **Baselining:** Mandate a single standardised and trusted method of measuring **net** emissions in England including carbon removals and renewable energy generation, then incentivise uptake to drive engagement.
- **Education:** Broaden public understanding of food systems, nutrition, food waste and biodiversity through the school curriculum to create a common knowledge.
- **Smart funding:** Grant support extended for investments delivering multiple beneficial outcomes or presenting good value, eg, second-hand equipment.
- **Regulation and independent advice:** on natural capital markets so farmers can invest or engage with confidence.

...And who changes it?

Those who benefit are the ones who need to 'change the game'—that is primarily grassroots farmers, local supply chains, consumers (and there are opportunities to join forces with these to grow share of voice), and government.

7. Personal Juror comments (where contributed)

Adrian Ivory:

"The charge was very topical and there was unanimous willing agreement that something needs to be done. This was on the basis of two-way conversations and coming up with solutions that were understood and worked practically and realistically for both parties. The process was very thorough and enjoyable, and it was fantastic to listen to the speakers and find that the majority wanted to hear our views—although not all were agreed by both sides. I learnt a huge amount and hope that this will form the start of a trusted partnership with all views listened to and understood, which will benefit all."

Penny Chantler:

"The charge that UK agriculturalists must play their part in achieving UK government climate change goals is correct. However, agriculturalists should not share a higher burden of responsibility than any other citizen of the UK. As farmers, growers and custodians of the landscape, I feel government are putting a greater pressure on agriculture to solve the climate crisis. We can be part of the solution, but government needs to recognise our contribution to the nation's wellbeing. Control of food, its production methods and high welfare stock standards must not be disregarded or compromised to reach those targets. The health and welfare of our nation must be all our responsibility."

Nat Marsden:

"A very well put together process, hopefully the outcome will be well-received and a win-win for all."

Cath Morley:

"This has been a very useful exercise and I have really enjoyed the process. I have learned many different things and it has been eye-opening in the size of the challenge facing farmers at the present moment in time. The process of jury and charges is certainly good for challenging opinion and harvesting ideas. I hope we have created something which will go on to help develop policy and instigate change."

7. Personal Juror comments (where contributed)

Peter McAllister:

"Land managers should—as a first priority—adopt sustainable farming practices wherever possible to improve efficiency and eliminate detrimental farm practices damaging to biodiversity and the wider ecosystem. Second, they should adopt biodiversity enhancement measures to improve ecosystem services, eg, riparian buffers, creation of new hedgerows, ponds, shelter belts, rough grass margins. Enhancing and recreating habitats should be viable in tandem with production."

Stuart Dainton:

"Polluting fossil fuel industries, along with deforestation/destruction of nature, are the problems. Solutions for a healthy future are in decentralised, community approaches with new thinking to deliver the necessary new policy/regulations. Radical change is essential, away from toxic input driven "big ag" models. If UK agriculture is to be part of the solution, market incentives, mindsets/cultures must transform, act at pace, for nature-based-solutions. Truly integrated land-use with diverse, layered, resilient landscape solutions is critical. Connected treescapes with smaller multifunctional wide variety food systems are needed; for security, clean water, thriving nature, improved personal health, innovation, economic prosperity and climate adaptation."

Trevor Bosomworth:

"The charge is not correct. The UK government roles are unrealistic, unachievable and unaffordable with their narrow focus on Net Zero and decarbonisation. However, UK farmers should continue to play an integral part in enhancing the environment. This should be shaped predominantly by food producers to ensure that viable food production remains at the heart of any changes. UK farmers, landowners and producers can utilise their connection with their customers and the wider public sector through the food they produce to deliver realistic long-term benefits as well as highly nutritious and affordable food."

8. Next steps

The Verdict is intended to stimulate debate and to challenge the status quo. At a time of such intense change in agriculture, there is an opportunity to input to evolving policy and offer the Jurors and the process as opportunities to improve policy development, decision-making and implementation.

The short report from the Jurors will be launched in April 2025 and communicated to those who participated in the exercise, as well as wider stakeholders.

Of particular interest are opportunities to:

- Contribute to evolving plans bringing together the Land Use Framework, Food Strategy, Farming Roadmap and Environmental Improvement Plan
- Contribute towards a re-articulation of goals for UK farming to address a broad cross-section of interlinked issues.
- Encourage closer working between governments of devolved nations, government departments and Defra departments.
- Offer opportunities for Defra departments to form 'apolitical' relationships with the aim of 'ground truthing' proposed policy.
- Create other opportunities for deliberative democracy exercises with the goal of meeting Defra ambitions for project 'co-design'.

A longer report on this exercise will be compiled for the AFN Network+ and released later in 2025, examining the potential for applying methods such as this to bridge divides, build consensus and achieve positive action, especially where polarised views exist.

For further information contact Amy Jackson on amy@oxtale.co.uk or visit her AFN Network+ page at https://tinyurl.com/farmerjury.

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