

The verdict's in! Farmers want to play their part in reducing emissions – but 'Net Zero' is disengaging them

A 'jury' of farmers has ruled unanimously that UK farming should play its part in meeting government climate and nature ambitions. But they warn that 'net zero' is disengaging farmers, with many questioning how farming's impact is being measured as well as the practicality and validity of proposed interventions.

These are the main conclusions following a unique two-day 'farmers' jury' experiment conducted in London earlier this year initiated through the AFN Network+.

Based on the Citizens' Jury model developed by The Jefferson Centre in the US, the event saw 16 farmers and land managers come from across the UK to hear evidence on climate change and emissions from a range of 'expert witnesses'. They then debated the role they and their peers should play in addressing the challenges.

The UK has legally committed to 'net zero' by 2050, with advice from the Climate Change Committee that farming should reduce net greenhouse gas emissions by 45% as its contribution. This has resulted in growing pressure being placed on food producers from supply chains and campaign groups.*

Jury members concluded that the 'net zero focus' was dominating the agenda in farming—despite being too narrow and failing to properly account for other important challenges such as food security, environmental enhancement and balanced land management.

They recognised that farmers were critical to government plans to tackle climate change-related issues in agriculture—but to act in an effective way that leads to real results, farmers needed a more central role in shaping goals, policy and specific interventions.

As a result of the experiment, the jury members are calling on government to bring farmers properly into the policy process, and to take a more holistic approach in acting on climate change within the food system rather than risking net zero 'tunnel vision'.

Such 'co-design' between farmers and policymakers was evident in Scotland and Wales, but less so in England, they observed. Juror Ian Powell, a mixed-enterprise farmer from Abergavenny, said: "The way in which the Environmental Farm Management Scheme in Wales changed in response to feedback illustrates the importance of thorough stakeholder consultation."

The jury believed engagement would also improve if 'bottlenecks' around measurement, funding, regulation and advice were tackled. Specifically, these included changing the way methane is accounted for, standardising carbon accounting methods, regulating nature markets, and widening funding for technology—for example, to cover second-hand equipment.

However, the jury also pointed out that farmers should take some responsibility for the current impasse over reducing emissions; changes to mindset and language were needed from both farming and government to move forward.

Dr Amy Jackson, a behaviour change champion for the AFN Network+ who set up and ran the farmers' jury experiment, said the jurors identified that current policy wasn't necessarily practical at farm level, and felt farmers themselves could also be partly to blame for this.

“The jury felt relationships with government had become quite political and tended to be largely managed through the farming unions.

“While they absolutely acknowledged the need for political dialogue, they thought government should also have better access to ordinary farmers for practical and technical testing of policy—for example through existing discussion groups or monitor farm networks,” she added.

“This would ensure civil servants had a safe space to ask questions and try out new ideas that were more acceptable on-farm.”

Juror Rob Thornhill, a dairy farmer from Derbyshire, pointed out the value of the collective 440 years’ experience in land management the 16 jurors had between them. “With this knowledge, farmers have a huge but as-yet untapped role to offer in shaping solutions for government—we just need to be included in the discussion.”

Trevor Bosomworth, a farmer and grower from North Yorkshire, said the group was clear that UK farmers should play a role—but they believed that role should be balanced land management rather than focusing on emissions reduction.

“This means playing an integral part in enhancing the environment while ensuring that viable food production remains at the heart of any changes,” he explained.

The jury believed there was a disproportionate focus on the contribution of farming to climate change compared with other industries. Penny Chantler, a sheep farmer from Herefordshire, said: “As farmers, growers and custodians of the landscape, I feel government is putting greater pressure on us in agriculture to solve the crisis than they are on others.”

Next steps will see the jury’s conclusions shared with governments across the four nations as well as with stakeholder organisations. In response to the jury’s findings, Professor Neil Ward, co-lead of the AFN Network+, said that farmers’ views and sentiments were crucially important to shaping the future of the agri-food system.

“This exercise provided a valuable opportunity to understand their concerns about addressing net zero, and their role in reducing emissions.

“While the UK government’s target of net zero by 2050 doesn’t require individual farms or the farming sector to eliminate all emissions entirely, the Climate Change Committee is currently advising that farming must reduce emissions by 45%.”

The short report summarising the jury findings can be found [here](#). A longer report analysing the full debate over the two days will be published later this year.

**The UK has legally committed to net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. While the Climate Change Committee has advised government that farming should reduce its net emissions by 45%, there is a widespread narrative within farming, its supply chains and its critics that the sector or even individual farmers are expected to attain net zero.*