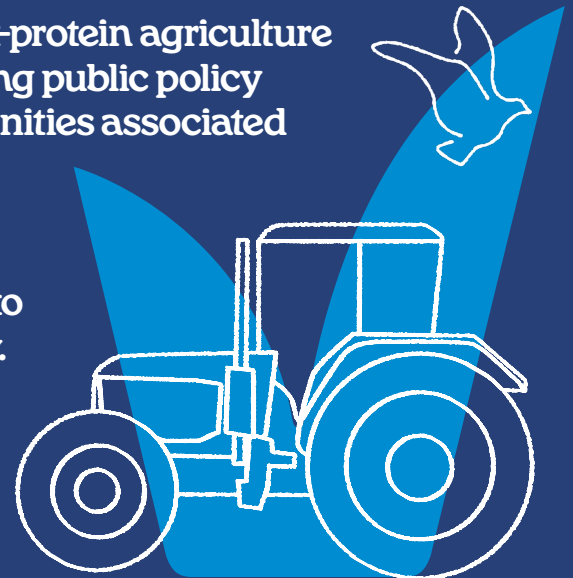


PLANT-BASED AGRICULTURE IN THE UK

POLICY BRIEFING

Increasing plant-based agricultural production brings multiple potential benefits to our climate, biodiversity and sustainable economy. Seizing the opportunity to be part of a global upturn in plant-protein production can be key to creating a new sector for UK jobs.

Countries across Europe and Asia are putting plant-protein agriculture at the centre of farming strategy, and are galvanising public policy to reflect the economic and environmental opportunities associated with growing more protein crops for human consumption. Given the UK food system accounts for around 35% of national carbon emissions, there is a question of how the UK can transition farming to support a more plant-based Net Zero food economy. With food security an integral issue, switching to a more plant-based protein agriculture has multiple potential benefits to nature, biodiversity and a sustainable economy.



The new Environmental Land Management System (ELMS) of farm subsidies entails lower environmental impacts from agriculture and a degree of rewilding which is much needed. However, with the growing market in meat and dairy alternatives, there is a significant economic opportunity to develop the low-carbon potential of UK plant-protein agriculture to support food industry innovation. The food technology sector is responding to this opportunity, however, as the 2022 UKRI report 'Alternative Proteins: Identifying UK Priorities' makes clear, change in the underpinning agricultural sector is needed to develop improved varieties and introduce new crops as protein sources.

Diversity in plant-proteins is the bridge between sustainability and innovation. A core principle of agricultural sustainability is the diversification of crop types, which guards against crop failure in fluctuating climatic conditions. Researchers at the leading crop science innovation centre NIAB, based in Cambridge, are of the view that underutilised plant-protein crops represent an opportunity to create a more climate resilient UK agricultural sector.

Making Britain's agricultural system truly sustainable, climate resilient and food secure, in a world where the alternative protein sector is forecast to grow to \$27 billion by 2027 and increasing profitability means addressing two main barriers:

PLANT-PROTEIN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

A well-managed sustainable agricultural transition can protect rural jobs. The government commissioned National Food Strategy estimated that plant-protein development in the UK could create 10,000 manufacturing jobs and secure 6,500 jobs in farming. Clearly there is a need to focus policy on value-chain development as well as how to grow the crops successfully. A lack of any UK protein policy and decades of agricultural policy focus on oilseeds and cereals, has severely limited public funding for research to enhance genetic variability, pulse crop diversification and value in the legume supply chain. A UK plant-protein strategy oriented to agricultural climate adaptation could be developed to harness the potential of domestic and global alternative protein markets.

PLANT-PROTEIN IN THE LAND USE FRAMEWORK

It is clear that a subsidy regime based on 'public benefit', must champion types of agriculture that meet the defined key criteria for environmentally friendly farming: low carbon, biodiversity, reduced air and waterway pollution, low inputs and water conservation. Protein crops have the potential to fulfil all of these measures. Adopting plant-based protein agriculture to fit in and around current farming practice and plans for ELMS represent the best way forward for agriculture in a low carbon UK. Policy makers should ensure that plant-based protein agriculture is a key strand of the forthcoming UK Land Use Framework.

What is the Vegetarian Society doing?

As a champion of a more sustainable UK farming sector the Vegetarian Society is committed to working with farmers in order to deliver a just transition away from livestock farming for meat with land instead used for arable crops, horticulture and rewilding. We believe UK farmers can lead the way in enhancing our food security, reducing carbon emissions and boosting the nation's biodiversity. Imagine if we could deliver a more efficient system and repurpose UK agricultural land to grow a broader range of crops, vegetables and fruit for direct human consumption, and furthermore, free up even more land for rewilding, carbon capture and renewables.

Why the UK needs a plant-protein strategy for sustainable agriculture

Land is a highly flexible resource. A low carbon transition in farming requires repurposing of land to simultaneously reduce the environmental footprint of food and give over land to carbon storage measures. This means some grassland will become woodland and some land that is currently given over to animal feed, will become land that produces plant-protein to feed people directly.

The UK needs a broad 'farm to fork' model, focused on a just and fair transition to plant-based proteins, plus a greater focus on arable crops and horticulture for human consumption. Studies and field trials demonstrate that a number of protein crops can be grown viably in the UK, including lentils, soya, fava beans and various types of pea, replacing meat as our primary source of protein.

In particular, the government's introduction of ELMS, a new sustainable approach to farm subsidy, seeks to deploy 'public money for public goods' but in its current form does not encompass gearing up plant-based protein agriculture for human consumption.

Consumer Trends

It's a fact that, when it comes to food, our consumption patterns are changing. The number of vegans and vegetarians has increased by between two and four-fold in the last 10 years, and more than half of Gen Z (citizens born 1997-2012) could be eating a meat-free diet by 2025. As many as 6.4m people in the UK in 2024 intend to adopt a meat-free diet in the coming year.

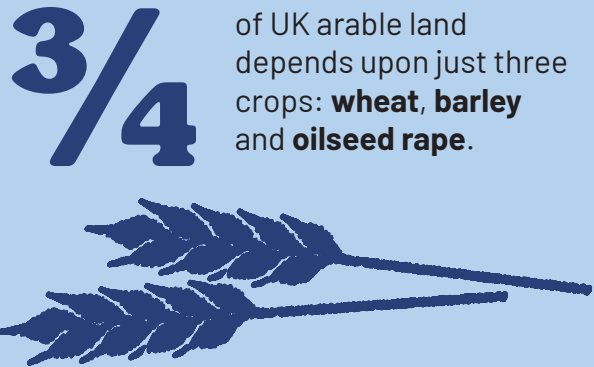
KEY NUMBERS:



48%
The amount of UK farmland used for **animal agriculture.**



Only 15%
of UK farmland is used for food crops to feed people.



3/4 of UK arable land depends upon just three crops: **wheat, barley** and **oilseed rape.**



Britain needs a **90%** increase in the consumption of beans...

...and a **75%** decrease in red meat consumption to meet healthy eating targets.

Plant-protein crops can have **1/10 of the carbon emissions** of per kilo protein compared to red meat.



We would be delighted to arrange a full briefing with you.

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About the Vegetarian Society

The Vegetarian Society is the UK's original and leading voice for the vegetarian and vegan movement. Our aim is to inspire and support everyone to move towards more sustainable and cruelty-free choices in their lives because kindness counts.

Through our education and engagement programmes to campaigning, policy work and product accreditation, we strive for a world without animal cruelty.

We do this by using our knowledge and expertise to work across our membership, communities, business, government, and likeminded organisations to help change behaviour, drive innovation and expand food choice across the industry.

In doing so we continue to build on our 175+ year legacy to grow a community driven by a collective desire to secure a kinder, healthier and more sustainable future for every life on earth.

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