

Soil Association Scotland
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EH8 9BL
7/3/23

RE: Rural Affairs and Islands Committee meeting on March 1

Dear Finlay,

After last week's meeting, I was contacted by a member of the committee regarding some comments made by one of the witnesses concerning organic farming. I have now read the official report and would like to respond to those points.

Overall, it was clear from the session, and previous sessions, that there is broad agreement that the way we farm and manage our land needs to change – and in many ways is already changing – in order to meet Scotland's ambitious climate and nature targets. It has been agreed this will also require changes in policy, and it is important that the committee makes judgements based on accurate information, data and the most robust evidence available.

Andrew Moir, who was speaking in his capacity as chair of the Arable Climate Change Group, made several remarks about organic farming. One was with regard to the experience in Sri Lanka. Mr Moir said: "Sri Lanka went all organic virtually overnight and the country is in a terrible state now. If you look up what has happened in Sri Lanka in the past year or 18 months, that will give you a good example of what the unintended consequences can be."

The Sri Lanka example tells us nothing about organic farming. Rather, it is a tale of failed governance. A panicked Sri Lankan government imposed chemical bans overnight because it ran out of foreign exchange to buy fertiliser. Chemical-reliant farmers cannot go 'cold turkey'. Switching to chemical-free organic farming involves a complete transformation in the way a farm operates, and this must be done carefully and over a period of time. No certification body in the world would propose an overnight switch to organic farming. This is why governments offer conversion support, to help farmers through that transition period.

Earlier in the session, Mr Moir also said: "Let us be clear: organic is fine and it has a niche market. The Scottish Government's ambition is to go higher. I do not think that that is possible, because the business is not there to do it."

It is fair to describe organic as 'niche'. At present only 1.8% of our land, or 89,000ha is fully organic ¹. However, as recently as 2003, 351,800ha – nearly four times as much – of Scottish farmland was organic ². The current ambition of Scottish Government is to double organic land by 2026 ³, which would take us to approximately 180,000ha. Based on recent history, this seems a modest target. There is clearly consumer demand – the UK organic market has

¹ [Organic farming statistics 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/organic-farming-statistics-2021)

² [\[ARCHIVED CONTENT\] Organic statistics « Statistics \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukiafrica/organic-statistics/)

³ [Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party - Shared Policy Programme - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/shared-policy-programme/pages/10-organic-farming.aspx)

experienced 11 straight years of growth ⁴, despite recent economic challenges. However, there remains a gap between levels of organic food production and levels of consumption in the UK, which is currently being met by imports.

It should also be noted that the EU has set a target of 25% of land to be organic across the bloc by 2030 ⁵. Ireland is aiming to reach 7.5% by 2027, Germany is aiming to reach 30% by 2030, and Austria is already at 25%, so expansion of organic is clearly possible.

Mr Moir continued: “Because the produce is organic, the cost will be too astronomically high for the people who want to buy it. There is not enough landmass to allow for organics to be mainstreamed. Yes, a percentage of farmers are producing organically, and they are doing it very well but, if you increase that percentage too much, organic produce will become mainstream and, therefore, the price will be too high for the vast majority of people who might want to buy it.”

There are two issues here: the cost of organic food, and the area of land required for mass take-up of organic farming (which, to be clear, is not what Scottish Government is proposing). First, on cost, it is true that organic food at present can be more expensive (although Kantar consumer data shows this price differential is lower in Scotland than the UK average) The cost of production is higher in organic systems, but much of the additional cost is in the supply chain, and without oversimplifying the issue, is a result of the relatively small-scale of the organic market. If there was a significant increase in food produced organically, then the cost would come down due to economies of scale. This is before we go into the argument about the true cost of production, and the hidden externalities of ‘cheap’ food in terms of pollution, biodiversity loss and the impact on public health.

Secondly, on land, modelling by French think tank IDDRI and the Food Farming and Countryside Commission ⁶ has shown that the UK could transition to agroecological farming (based on data from organic farming) and feed a growing population by 2050 whilst significantly reducing emissions, improving biodiversity and eliminating deforestation from supply chains. This issue has also been addressed by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation⁷, which found that, with the right circumstances, organic has the potential to feed the world. The FAO also pointed out the global problem is not a shortage of food, but rather a challenge of access to and distribution of food.

In response to a question about the climate benefits of organic farming, Mr Moir went on to say: “Organic is worse. The carbon footprint goes up per kilogram produced when you have organic farming.... If I use less nitrogen and produce less, my carbon footprint per kilogram of production goes up.”

This type of statement from the single perspective of GHG emissions per hectare or per kilogramme of product is often made against organic farming. It is a narrow view that fails to account for the vast array of ways that food and farming contribute to climate change, as

⁴ [Download the Organic Market Report 2023 | Soil Association Certification](#)

⁵ [From farm to fork: Our food, our health, our plan \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁶ [Modelling an agroecological UK in 2050 – findings from TYFAregio \(iddri.org\)](#)

⁷ [Organic Agriculture: Can organic farmers produce enough food for everybody? \(fao.org\)](#)

well as the destructive effects of industrial agriculture on soils, biodiversity and the natural resources on which we depend for food production.

A meta-analysis of 74 field trials with conventional and organic management ⁸ showed that organic fields sequestered 450kg more atmospheric carbon per hectare and annum than conventional fields. Soil organic carbon stocks have been found to be significantly higher on organic farms ⁹ while studies have found 30% more biodiversity on organic farms ¹⁰. A separate report by for WWF Scotland in 2019, *Delivering on Net Zero: Scottish Agriculture*, identified organic farming as "the highest single emissions reduction opportunity" ¹¹.

There are different approaches to farming, and many different views, as the sessions so far have made clear. We think there is strong evidence to show that organic farming can play an important role in helping Scotland reach its net zero and biodiversity/nature recovery targets. We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to organic farming and believe that those farmers who wish to farm organically should continue to be supported through current and future agricultural policy to do so.

I hope that you will take these points on board.

Yours sincerely,

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⁸ [Enhanced top soil carbon stocks under organic farming — The University of Aberdeen Research Portal \(elsevier.com\)](#)

⁹ [ifoameu_advocacy_climate_change_report_2016.pdf \(organicseurope.bio\)](#)

¹⁰ [Organic farming and biodiversity - IFOAM Organics Europe](#)

¹¹ https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-12/WWF_Net_Zero_and_Farming.pdf