The Future of Food and Farming

A Report Summarising Three Workshops for Smaller Businesses on a Sustainable Food Chain

February 2007
Introduction

If something goes wrong with the food chain, the implications can be felt in hundreds of different ways around the world. Human and animal health and the environment can suffer and there can be major economic and social disruption which can extend beyond the food chain into wider society. GM Freeze's position on GM food and crops is based on the need for a precautionary approach to ensure that the potential impacts have been evaluated and understood before full scale commercial growing commences. Our position also requires that alternative approaches to producing and processing food are fully evaluated and understood before final and, potentially, irreversible decisions are made.

We also see the need for the food chain to become more democratic so that people who grow and consume food can feel that they have some say in how food is produced and what it contains. This would help to restore trust and confidence along the supply chain which have been undermined by a succession of crises from BSE to foot and mouth to GM foods.

In a series of independently facilitated workshops held in 2006, GM Freeze set out to provide individuals involved in producing, processing and consuming the raw products of farming and involved in rural development to spend time discussing the components of a sustainable food chain and how it might be achieved.

This report summarises the common conclusions of the workshops and highlights any significant regional difference or nuances when they occurred.

The Workshops

The workshops were planned with the intention of providing the participants who are often by passed by conventional government consultations on rural affairs with the luxury of half a day devoted to discussing their view of a sustainable food chain. Each workshop had the same structure and was facilitated by the same independent person.

Who Came?

The workshops were held in mid-Wales, The Highlands of Scotland and Staffordshire in June and October 2006 (see annex for details). A total of twenty seven people attended all three workshops. This group of people was diverse but had strong links to local food production and rural economic development. Each workshop had the same structure and was facilitated by the same independent person.

The links in the food chain represented by participants in the Future of Food and Farming Workshops is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm shop</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High St retail</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafe/pub/restaurants/ B&amp;B</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School meals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm supplies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural development</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer/local activists</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural development</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB total comes to more than the number of participants because several people were involved in more than one aspect.

Invites were sent to the companies all along the chain in each area including regional and local manufacturers/processors. Persuading smaller businesses to attend proved to be the most difficult aspect of the organisation because people in this sector work in small teams where a half day absence by one person is quickly noticed and may have economic implications. Several people dropped out at the last minute because of unforeseen business commitments that could not wait. As a result some sectors were not represented, for instance larger arable farmers, and local processors, such as bakers. Larger, regionally based food producers were invited but declined.

Thus people attending the Future of Food and Farming Workshops could not be described as a representative sample of the food chain but do provide an interesting snapshot of opinion of people directly involved or interested in producing and selling food.

The workshops were all structured in the same way and the independent facilitator, Penny Walker, ensured that all three kept to an approximate timetable so that each group was able to have time to think about and discuss the following:

- The role of food and farming
- What would a sustainable food chain look like
- Actions required to achieve a sustainable food chain

It was agreed that comments made at the workshops would not be attributed to individuals.

The Role of Food and Farming

Participants in all three workshops were clear that the primary role of the food chain was to provide a top quality and healthy diet for people at a price that farmers and consumers can afford.

They also saw many other spin-off benefits from the role of food producer that farming provides and felt that all played an important part in the life of the nation. The participants at all three workshops were keen to emphasise that food production was a fundamental part of society and always had been. In contrast, some people in the Highlands recognised the rapidly changing nature of food production in the globalised market and discussed the tensions and opportunities this presents. There was a sense that their role was taken for granted and unappreciated and undervalued by decision makers and the public.

The other key roles of the food chain brought up in discussion:

Economic benefits produced by generating rural economic activity, providing employment in towns and countryside, contributing to the general economy by cutting down on food imports. The reliance on public subsidy was mentioned in this context and participants supported the removal of subsidies on producing food provided the UK was allowed "a level playing field" on which to compete with imported food. Participants were concerned about cheap imports from countries that operated to lower standards than the UK. The need to produce food in an efficient way came through at one workshop.

Environmental benefits were seen as an important by-product of food production in the UK especially the management of the countryside role for wildlife, landscape and recreation. One participant described recreation as a "crop" for farmers. Shortening the food chain to cut out unnecessary food miles was a theme that emerged at all
three workshops. One participant introduced the idea of “stupid” trade to describe the long distance some food travels. However, in the Highlands workshop the smallness and low density of the local population in the north of Scotland (“equivalent to the population of Leicester”) made the developments based on a highly localised food economy more difficult. Intensive production to meet demands for cheap food was often in conflict with the wider environmental role of the food chain. Consumer expectations had been raised to the point where they are looking for foods to be on tap right around the year instead of having seasonal foods.

Maintaining rural culture and the rural way of life were also seen as important aspects of the food chain as well. Participants all recognised the changes in society, such as two working parents and single parent households, which were resulting in the greater use of pre-packaged and processed foods, the loss of cooking skills and the lack of basic knowledge of food and how it is produced. There was also concern that there was a lack of tuition in schools and a lack of kitchens in schools.

Respondents in the Highlands thought the role of wild meat was undervalued and that prices to those that produced it were too low – in common with farmed foods. Lack of basic knowledge about wild foods was a barrier to them playing more of a role.

What would a Sustainable Farming and food chain look like?

Most participants were optimistic that food production could adapt to the demands of a sustainable future providing changes were made that allowed adaptation to take place. A minority of people felt that the current trends towards larger scale production and world markets were harder to tackle but saw the benefits of local marketing.

Every one agreed that economic viability of food production was essential if the farming and food chain is to fulfil its potential role in a sustainable future. There was a strong feeling against subsidies to control cropping - “farmers don’t like growing weeds”. Prices paid must reflect the value of the effort put into growing them if the food chain were to recruit and retain new employees and business people (especially young people) to work in the food chain. This was felt to be the case especially for farming which had to become an attractive career option. The survival of the family farm also hinged on this. One participant said that farming should once again become the “bottom brick” of the economy.

Trade of food, in the words of one participant, should be “smart” ie not trading in goods we can equally well grow ourselves. Food trade needed to be more balanced for the good of the national economy and to reduce fossil fuels transporting around the world.

Most participants were keen to see consumer confidence in UK food and farming rebuilt. Traceability and transparency were vital in this process and this was already happening. The common view of food sourcing was “the more local the better”. People emphasised the need to maximise use of local markets outside the normal household market to places such as schools, hotels and hospitals.

Healthy and happy people (and consequently food producers) should be a target for a sustainable food chain. The health of the general population was seen as a very important part of sustainable food production and the long term cost saving to the NHS of a healthy well nourished population was recognised. Politicians need to be far more tuned into the opportunities to gain several benefits from one policy – promoting a healthy diet provides market opportunities for farmers and growers.

Less waste of energy and resources was also important and the groups all saw the need to make sure that a characteristic such as “knobbliness” in fruit and vegetables was not used to reject good food.

A reduction in the environmental impact of farming would require the use of fewer as well as different chemicals and to cut dependency on fossil fuels. Farmers, with their local knowledge of soil and climate were in a good position to maximise the potential for reducing inputs and making the most of renewable energy.

Well informed consumers and farmers were needed so that sustainable practices would gain acceptance. Trends such as the growth of local food and ethical purchasing meant that most participants were optimistic that attitudes could be changed. Several people emphasised the need to explain the role that animals produced for meat played in managing the countryside for the wider good to overcome concerns about killing livestock for food.

Diversifying what was grown locally would be important to support local food production and reduce food miles. Local quantities would need to match local demand more closely. Diversity of cropping or products can also help to mitigate the losses if one crop fails or the price crashes. Energy crops could be part of a new cropping pattern. Diversity of ages involved in food production was also essential for the long term health and viability of the food chain.

Transparency would need to be practiced right along the chain to provide consumers with some guarantee about how and where food was produced but also to ensure fairness for all the links in the chain. At present the power in the chain lay too much with the supermarkets.

A range of new and old skills would be needed in a sustainable food chain. For farmers and land managers old skills needed to be retained and new ones acquired to deal with the new demands to safeguard the environment and to remain a viable business. For consumers, new skills would be required to cook local and seasonal products. There were already good examples where this was happening, for instance through Sure Start but much more was needed. There was also a desire to shift the consumers’ preference from the large output, low quality end of the market to the better quality, fully traceable and local end. Some participants saw the need to improve the ability of households to produce nutritious food from less expensive ingredients to improve opportunities to have access to a balanced diet.

Co-operation between farmers; farmers and the rest of the food chain; and the food chain and consumers would be required in a sustainable system. Respect emerged as important in one workshop and also the need to avoid alienation of any part of the chain. People from urban areas must understand rural areas, understand food and farming, and appreciate them. Producers had to listen to consumers and respond to their needs.

The need for changes towards sustainability may need to be regulated in some way whilst allowing entrepreneurship to flourish along the food chain.
Retaining more money within the local community and fair prices would be important.

New ways of thinking will be needed to turn problems into solutions. In the Mid Wales workshop the example of the need to control bracken on the hills being linked to the shortage of bedding or as an energy crop was raised.

Actions required to achieve a sustainable food chain - Getting from Here to There.

All three workshops agreed that the transition to the sustainable farming and food chain would not be easy. Political, economic and social barriers would be considerable but as one of the Highland farming participants put it we need to be "bold and revolutionary".

The strongest and commonest theme which emerged from all three workshops was the need to educate people right along the food chain so that there was a much better understanding of how and where food was produced. The need to build trust right down the chain was felt to be an important aspect of education. All three workshops saw the need to improve the knowledge of children and parents to increase understanding of the countryside so that people understand that it is principally a working place for food production where they can also enjoy landscape, recreation and wildlife.

Politicians also need to be educated on the impacts of globalisation and cheap food imports on the UK countryside and the need to maintain a working countryside rather than see it as a museum for tourists. Politicians need to understand the long term problems arising from a poor diet much better and plan to avoid future NHS costs by promoting healthy food. There was a repeated view that politicians should get out more and talk to food producers. There was an agreement that long term and consistent politics were needed if the necessary changes to sustain- able practices are to be put in place across the countryside.

Farmers were the other group identified to need more education – specifically in how to communicate with people - "don't be grumpy"! Good examples and role models should be promoted.

Cooperation between farmers was also seen as an integral part of the sustainable food chain but it was recognised that the UK has a poor record suggesting we may need educating in this area as well. Entrepreneurial activity should be encouraged along the chain – farmers are not necessarily the best marketers and this may be best left to others. New approaches, such as community supported farms and the development of local biofuels production were needed.

Opinion was divided on how to improve education. Some favoured working through existing organisations but others wanted an independent body to co-ordinate activity. However, all agreed that there was a big gap that needed to be filled.

The restoration of a balance in economic power along the food chain was seen as a vital part of the sustainable future. This would mean addressing supermarket power. Allied to this had to be new incentives to get young people wanting to work in farming and food production. In this context access to land was crucial.

Conclusions

There was a remarkable similarity in the ideas coming from all three workshops in highlighting the role education will play in a sustainable future for farming and the food chain. This was needed to obtain sufficient level of understanding in the public and politicians to get policies and attitudes in place which supported a sustainable approach to farming (which might mean paying more for food). Local, quality production and consumption was the favoured approach, with lots of links between producers and consumers to build up understanding and trust.

Most of the suggestions as to ways forward were political, social and economic in nature rather than linked to technical innovation – better educated people, more co-operation and more encouragement for entrepreneurship and adjusting the economic balance along the food chain.

One person summed up the general feeling about the present policies on a sustainable food chain as like "we were re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic". Those people taking sustainable local action on food were the ones actually manning the lifeboats.

The message to politicians was to get out and about and listen and learn before setting policies and co-operate.

Acknowledgements

GM Freeze would like to thank all the participants who came to the three workshops for the enthusiastic spirit they brought to the events and their creative thinking. Thanks are also due to our independent facilitator Penny Walker who devised the structure of the workshops and maintained a consistency across all three. Her accuracy in recording the views expressed made the production of this report all the more easier. Thanks are due to the Munlochy Vigil and Rodbaston College Food Club for their assistance in organising the Highland and Midlands workshops respectively. We would also like to acknowledge the excellent service provided by our three venues: The National Centre for Alternative Technology, Ross County Football Club and the Meynell Ingram Arms. Finally thanks are due to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Network for Social Change for funding the Future of Food and Farming Workshops.

Annex – Details of workshops