Sustainable Intensification

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INTRODUCTION

It is often remarked that a combination of growing population, a shift in diet towards more meat consumption and limited resources, in particular land, will generate enormous challenges for agriculture and the food chain. Couple these challenges to increasing global social, economic and environmental instability that has characterized most of this century and it is clear why food security is firmly on the political agenda.

In the UK the second half of the 20th century saw a rapid increase in agricultural productivity through intensification and specialisation. This brought concomitant problems including pollution of water bodies, impacts on biodiversity and degradation of soil resources. Reductions in the agricultural work force have had an impact on rural society and increased the isolation, and often loneliness, of farmers. Continual pressure on prices of raw agricultural commodities have left some farmers, even if millionaires on paper by virtue of their land holdings, struggling financially.

In part, the problems can be characterized as a conflict between agricultural intensification and sustainable practice. The term sustainable intensification pinpoints one way to resolve the conflict. Sustainable intensification is generally accepted to involve boosting agricultural productivity, whilst reducing environmental impacts and extending the wide array of ecosystem services that society expects from the countryside. However, that is easier said than done so the UK Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has sought to address this challenge by investing £4 million of research through the Sustainable Intensification Research Platform (SIP).

This conference explores the outcomes of SIP and other relevant research. The approach has been multidisciplinary, and this is reflected in the conference structure with sessions on farming practice, both at landscape and farm levels, knowledge exchange, metrics, sustainable land, and a look to the future including policy considerations. While there is a strong emphasis on the environmental aspects of sustainability, neither economic nor social aspects have been, nor should be, forgotten.

Rob Carlton
Convener. Cropping and the Environment group.
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