OGP Policy Working Group: Background to Food and Farming

What is happening in Oxfordshire now

Despite over 50% of food in Oxford city coming from the UK, rather than further afield in the EU or overseas, a mere 1% of the food consumed is locally sourced – mainly from farmers' markets, box schemes, allotments, and direct sale to restaurants. If only vegetables are considered, then the proportion jumps up to 3.5% sourced locally.

(https://goodfoodoxford.org/foodprinting-oxford-how-to-feed-a-city/)

Farmland accounts for 74% of Oxfordshire's land cover, of which 56% is under cereals farming and 30% under livestock grazing.

"Over recent years there has been a restructuring of farm size in the county. There has been an 11% reduction in the number of small farms (20 ha to 50 ha) and a 5% increase in the number of holdings greater than 100 ha in size over the same period (Defra, 2015). This could be due to increasing land values making it difficult for new entrants to the sector to purchase land, resulting in a switch to contract farming."

(https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Farmland-%E2%80%93-from-the-State-of-Oxfordshire%E2%80%99s-Nature-2017-full-report.pdf)

Small-scale farmers find it increasingly difficult to make a living in competition with agro-industrial production and as profit margins are squeezed by supermarkets, leaving no leeway to deal with crop failures caused by changing weather patterns etc. This forces many to sell up to farming conglomerates or housing developers, with an accompanying loss of rural livelihoods as farming becomes increasingly mechanised.

Agro-industrial methods of food production have led to a serious loss of soil fertility and loss of biodiversity, to an extent that threatens food security and the health and survival of many species of insects, birds and soil organisms. These methods are responsible for a significant toxic load in the environment. Agro-pollutants of greatest concern for human health are pathogens from livestock, pesticides, nitrates in groundwater, trace metallic elements and emerging pollutants, including antibiotics and antibiotic-resistant genes excreted by livestock. Agro-industrial food production is also responsible for large quantities of greenhouse gas emissions, through methane produced by livestock fed unnatural diets, fuel for heavy farm machinery, transport over long distances, etc.

What the Green Party needs to do

Policies are needed to protect, and make more land available for, agroecological ('regenerative', sustainable, mainly organic) farming, community-supported agriculture, etc. and to grow good food efficiently and locally, cutting food miles and fuel usage. Agroecological farming sequesters carbon, improves soil fertility and water storage, produces healthy food using very few if any pesticides and artificial fertilisers, and fosters biodiversity and wildlife habitats (see more on this below). It is a fallacy that intensive, agro-industrial farming is necessary to feed the world's growing population (if we assume a large reduction in the consumption of meat). The world already produces enough food to feed 16

billion people from grain crops alone! And a third of all food produced is wasted. Most grain grown in the UK is used for animal feed.

Most of the farms that farm like this already are small mixed farms, which can in fact be more efficient at producing food per acre than intensively farmed monocultures. They also provide individuals and families with a satisfying way of life. There are many young people who would like to be able to farm in this way, but high land prices currently bar the way to new entrants to farming.

However, it is also important to work with mainstream, large-scale farmers to encourage them to switch from agro-industrial to agroecological farming methods and to help them to do this. This is not a niche view, since several mainstream bodies have produced reports saying the same thing at the scale of the UK, EU, and the world. And some farmers are now realising that farming with nature rather than relying on artificial inputs has financial as well as other benefits.

We should also:

- Foster local supply chains: farmers' markets, farm shops, box schemes, etc., to help local farmers sell profitably.
- Call for policies that work towards food sovereignty – with as much food as possible produced in the UK, relying as little as possible on imports.
- Encourage tree planting to shelter and feed livestock, store water and encourage biodiversity. However, tree planting on a farm or county basis needs a well-planned strategy, rooted in ecological principles, and not carried out willy-nilly. It is essential to plant the right trees (usually native trees) in the right places (bearing in mind that trees and woodland are not the only habitat that matters); trees have often been planted at the expense of wetland (and heath). Agroforestry should be emphasized.
- Encourage farmers to protect and create features such as hedgerows, ponds, woodland, meadows and marshes, and routes for wildlife from one area to another. They are in fact being steered towards this by the Environmental Land Management Scheme (contained in the Agriculture Act 2020), which aims to implement "public money for public goods" in agriculture to replace the EU subsidies which farmers previously claimed.
- Teach about growing and cooking healthy food in schools (there is still one school farm in the county, at the Warriner School near Banbury). "Note that there is a near-perfect, one-to-one correspondence between good farming (based on the principles of agroecology), sound nutrition, and great cooking. All are variations on a theme of 'plenty of plants, not much meat, and maximum variety'" (Colin Tudge). This will have big benefits for public health.
- Encourage organisations like Waste 2 Taste in Oxford that are working in the community teaching people how to cook cheap nutritious meals and reduce their personal food waste.

We recognise the twin problems of food waste and food poverty in Oxfordshire. We will support the network of food banks and hubs working to pass on waste from the supply chain to those who cannot afford it. "However, we know that food banks are an Elastoplast and in truth a serious indictment of the status quo. Food is currently unaffordable largely

because of runaway house prices. Similarly: the prime cause of waste is not people's profligacy (though that exists) but (a) gratuitous 'value adding' (e.g. throwing out all the fruit and veg that don't meet the supermarkets' arbitrary standards) and (b) the overproduction of meat". (Colin Tudge)

Farming and growing also play a role in public health, not only in helping people to eat more nutritious diets, but also in mental health. Care farming is now recognised as an effective therapy, and there are various organisations in Oxfordshire involved in helping children and adults with and mental and physical disabilities or difficulties – these should be encouraged.

Note on agroecological farming

Agroecological/regenerative/sustainable/organic farming works with nature rather than against it. It uses the science of ecology to reduce or eliminate the need for pesticides and artificial fertilisers by growing combinations or rotations of crops which help to keep each other and the soil healthy. Relatively small numbers of animals can be grazed on pasture rich in a wide variety of plants which keep them healthy and reduce or eliminate the need to use antibiotics.

It has a myriad benefits:

- Carbon sequestration: trees, healthy crops and meadows, wetlands, etc all store large amounts of carbon (and sustainable numbers of animals fed natural diets – e.g. pasture-fed beef – do not increase methane levels in the atmosphere).
- Biodiversity: growing a variety of different crops without using pesticides and artificial fertilisers, and encouraging different habitats (woodland, flower meadows, ponds, boggy areas, etc) allows biodiversity to flourish and this brings about a positive feedback loop, with insects and birds bringing their own forms of pest control.
- Flood prevention: healthy soil retains large amounts of water.
- Greater crop resilience to drought: healthy soil produces plants with deep roots which find water in dry weather.
- No reliance on imported inputs – agrochemicals, soya used as animal feed (which often comes from land that was formerly rainforest).
- Local economic benefits: farming and horticulture along these lines is labour-intensive, creating jobs. It is easily done on small family farms and by community-supported agriculture schemes, preserving local livelihoods. Jobs are also provided by selling though farmers' markets, veg box schemes, etc.

Some useful links

See also: https://www.westoxon-greens.uk/-_food__agriculture.html

Environmental organisations in Oxfordshire involved with food & farming:

Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment: https://www.trustforoxfordshire.org.uk/ which has links with farmers.

Wild Oxfordshire: Wildlife and Farming: https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/education/