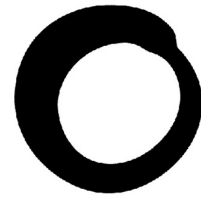


Briefing

December 2001



**Friends of
the Earth**

**Northern
Ireland**

Vision Impaired

An Analysis of the DARD Vision Group Report

Introduction

Farming is in crisis. The industry has been devastated by over-supply and consequent falls in world market prices, a strong pound, and a series of food safety and/or animal health catastrophes, most notably BSE and foot and mouth disease. Farm incomes are pitifully low, farmers' average age is now almost sixty and the number of farms in Northern Ireland is declining steadily.

But farming is also at a crossroads. EU enlargement, reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the prospect of further World Trade Organisation (WTO) agreements require that important decisions be made about how our countryside is farmed and how our food is produced.

In order to map a way forward, a broad debate is needed. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's contribution to the debate comes in the form of the report of its Vision Group¹. This briefing sets out why that report is an inadequate foundation on which to build the future of food and farming in Northern Ireland and why it presents a dangerously narrow agenda on which to conduct the current debate.

The Vision Group

Much of the explanation for the inadequacy of the Vision Group report lies in its timing and its composition. The Group was appointed almost a year before the foot and mouth outbreak by direct rule minister Adam Ingram and, although its brief was later amended to include foot and mouth considerations, the report deals only with biosecurity measures and not the wider issues raised by the outbreak. The Group was dominated by civil servants, economists and the agri-food industry. It included only one person from a voluntary sector background and no-one to represent consumer interests.

¹ Vision for the future of the agri-food industry, 4 October 2001, www.dardni.gov.uk

Vision Group's Underpinning Rationale

The Vision Group identifies six factors driving the need for change, which can be summarised thus:

- Historical trends: shrinking proportion of household spend on food and fewer jobs in farming.
- Changed economic environment: strength of sterling against the euro and UK beef excluded from export markets.
- Changed policy environment: CAP reform, EU enlargement and WTO rules will require food prices to fall close to world market levels, and support may be switched away from production towards environmental and rural development objectives.
- Environmental issues, particularly climate change.
- Consumer trends: food safety, demographic changes, changing tastes and lifestyles, animal welfare, the environment and sustainable farming.
- New ways of doing business: globalisation which enables supplies to be sourced from all over the world, new markets and 'localisation'.

Challenging the Rationale

Friends of the Earth (FOE) broadly accepts the Vision Group's underpinning rationale, with three important exceptions.

- Regarding the shrinking proportion of household spend on food, FOE argues that our apparently cheap food is, in fact, costing us very dear. As well as CAP subsidies and compensation payments following, for example, BSE and FMD, there are other costs attributable to industrial agriculture, such as pollution, which are indirectly paid for by taxpayers. A recent attempt to quantify these costs estimated that, in the UK, they totalled at least £2.34 billion in 1996 alone. Significant costs arise from contamination of drinking water with pesticides (£120 million per year), nitrate (£16m), *Cryptosporidium* (£23m), and phosphate and soil (£55m), from damage to wildlife, habitats, hedges and drystone walls (£124m), from emissions of gases (£1,113m), from soil erosion and organic carbon losses (£96m), from food poisoning (£169m), and from BSE (£607m).
- FOE challenges the assumption that a further decline in the number of people involved in farming is inevitable. These falls are a consequence of the agricultural and economic policies currently in vogue. FOE believes that high rural employment is both achievable and desirable. Organic farms, and small and medium sized farms, are more labour intensive than larger, industrial ones. High rural employment must be a policy objective.
- FOE believes that further WTO agreements should be resisted and that the UK Government should start the process within the EU to remove food and agriculture from the World Trade Organisation's control.

Vision Group's Conclusions

The Vision Group concludes that the industry must make structural adjustments in order to become more competitive. The proposals can be summarised thus (page 10):

- produce food for global markets;
- become more 'efficient' in order to reduce food prices close to world market levels;
- fewer farms, fewer farmers, more 'pluriactive' farmers and more off-farm employment;
- environmental goods provided in exchange for financial support;
- meet consumers' environmental expectations;
- provide government supported training and research and development.

Why the Vision is Flawed

- The Vision includes a fatalistic assumption that **globalisation** is inevitable. The report's authors believe that the only option open to farming in Northern Ireland is to export into global markets, and no alternative trading model is offered. To compete in the global food economy, prices would need to fall close to world market levels, and the cost reductions will require greater economies of scale - fewer, larger farms and intensive, unsustainable production methods.
- The Vision acknowledges the imperative to tackle **climate change** (page 9) but its focus on global markets will necessitate the transport of food over long distances, which contributes to climate change. The transport from New Zealand to the UK of a kilogram of apples accounts for its own weight in carbon dioxide emissions. Fruit and vegetables now represent the largest category of air freight, at 13%. To combat climate change, there is a need to reduce 'food miles' by becoming less reliant on food imports and exports.
- The Vision acknowledges the opportunities arising from **localisation** (page 9) but fails to suggest ways in which these opportunities might be exploited, preferring to focus on global markets. In fact, the document makes no further mention of localisation and does not explore the potential to boost farm incomes by establishing chains of local producers, processors, retailers and consumers. In a supportive policy environment, local food can make a significant contribution to the food economy and ought not to be dismissed as a niche market.
- The Vision fails to recommend a radical agenda for the Minister to pursue, via the UK and Irish Governments, at the **World Trade Organisation**. FOE believes that further WTO agreements should be resisted and that the UK Government should start the process within the EU to remove food and agriculture from the World Trade Organisation's control. The Agreement on Agriculture should be dismantled and agriculture removed from other WTO agreements, such as Technical Barriers to Trade.
- The Vision fails to recommend a radical agenda for the Minister to pursue in Europe on reform and replacement of the **Common Agricultural Policy**. FOE believes that the CAP should be abandoned by 2006 and replaced with a Rural Sustainable Development Policy which would reward landowners for good stewardship of land, biodiversity and natural resources, and support diverse local food economies.
- The Vision has a narrow view of '**efficiency**', one based on cost of production or output per person, which will only lead to intensification and unsustainable farming. Modern definitions of efficiency consider the availability of the best food for everyone; the protection of natural resources and biodiversity; the creation and maintenance of landscapes; use of the countryside for recreation; the humane treatment of farm animals; and the maintenance of a dynamic and diverse rural economy.
- The Vision aims to 'delight' **consumers**, however the Vision Group included no-one to represent consumer interests, and the report has nothing radical to say about two important consumer concerns - genetic modification (GM) and pesticide residues.
- As the only region of the UK and Ireland where **GM** crops are not being grown, farmers in Northern Ireland are at a competitive advantage to produce GM-free foods for sale at premium prices. The Vision does not recommend that legislation be introduced to keep Northern Ireland GM free.
- The Vision does not aim to eliminate pesticide residues from food, and fails to recommend that the Minister urge the UK Government to introduce a tax on **pesticides**.

- The Vision does not recommend an ambitious target be set for the area of farmland under **organic** production, despite the obvious market opportunity to substitute for imported organic food and bridge the gap between supply and consumer demand. The Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has committed itself to a threefold increase in the area of land under organic production in England and Wales, to 10%. In a supportive policy environment, organics can make a significant contribution to the food economy and ought not to be dismissed as a niche market.
- The Vision does not address the need for regulation of **supermarkets** and will do nothing to release farmers from the supermarket ‘armlock’. FOE believes that a new, legally enforceable Code of Conduct should be introduced for major supermarkets dealing with suppliers and, further, that an independent supermarket watchdog, for example OffShop, be established.
- The Vision does not embrace the issues of **public health and food poverty**, reflecting the narrow industry focus of the brief.
- The **rural proofing** proposed in the Vision is a welcome first step but it cannot substitute for cross-departmental policies to support and sustain rural communities, such as would be included in a Rural White Paper. The Vision document must not be mistaken as a blueprint for the future of rural communities, where a much wider debate will be needed.

Conclusion

Now is the time for a fundamental re-think of how we farm our countryside and produce our food. We are urging the Minister to widen the scope of the debate to include:

- releasing farmers from the supermarket armlock
- protecting family farms from the potentially disastrous effects of world trade rules
- the potential to boost farm incomes by producing food for local consumption
- the scope for low-input and organic farming
- genetic modification and pesticides
- public health and food poverty.

As its contribution to this important debate, Friends of the Earth will shortly publish ‘Get Real About Food and Farming’, a vision for the future of food and farming in Northern Ireland.

A debate about the future of farming is already raging in Great Britain and in countries across Europe, and it needs to happen here too. The excellent leadership shown by Bríd Rodgers during the foot and mouth crisis needs to be demonstrated again now. FOE is calling on her to recognise that the time is ripe for such a debate and declare the next six months a time of unprecedented participation in shaping the future of food and farming.

Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems which makes life better for people.

Friends of the Earth is:

- the UK’s most influential national environmental campaigning organisation
- the most extensive environmental network in the world, with almost one million supporters across five continents and 68 national organisations worldwide
- a unique network of campaigning local groups, working in over 200 communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- dependent on individuals for 90 per cent of its income.

Friends of the Earth (Northern Ireland) 40 Wellington Park Belfast BT9 6DN
Tel 028 9066 4311 Fax 028 9066 0727 Email foe-ni@foe.co.uk Website www.foe.co.uk/ni

Friends of the Earth Limited Registered in London No 1012357 Registered Office 26-28 Underwood Street London N1 7JQ
Printed on paper made from 100% post-consumer waste.