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State of Nature report ‘ignores the scientific evidence’ in continuing to blame high yield farming for biodiversity declines

Pro-science think-tank Science for Sustainable Agriculture has issued the following response to the State of Nature report issued today by the RSPB and other UK environmental NGOs:

“In pursuing a one-dimensional assault on high-yield farming practices as one of the major causes of reported biodiversity declines, the State of Nature (SoN) Partnership ignores the enormous progress made by Britain’s farmers to produce food more sustainably, for example through more precise and targeted application of pesticides and fertiliser, increased adoption of min-till and no-till cultivation systems, and selection of high-yielding crop varieties less reliant on chemical inputs. Advances in agricultural technologies such as gene editing, AI, sensor technology and precision engineering will help accelerate the pace of these improvements to further reduce farming’s environmental footprint.

In its assertion that “nature-friendly farming needs to be implemented at a much wider scale to halt the decline in farmland wildlife”, the SoN Partnership also ignores the increasing weight of scientific evidence pointing to an overriding need to minimise the area of land used for farming to protect biodiversity. Disappointingly, SoN does not challenge the ‘cause and effect’ nature of its assumptions regarding modern agriculture, or reflect on whether the scientific evidence supports a relentless focus on agri-environmental, or land-sharing, policy approaches.

In fact, as Professor Andrew Balmford and fellow conservation scientists at the University of Cambridge have repeatedly observed following extensive research into the comparative environmental impacts of different farming systems, the scientific evidence increasingly suggests that a land-sparing approach – farming as productively as possible on land that is farmed, leaving more room for natural habitats to be left intact – is the most effective way to produce sufficient food for a growing population while preventing biodiversity loss and tackling climate change.

One of Professor Balmford’s colleagues in that research, Professor Rhys Green, is a former Principal Research Biologist at the RSPB – one of the lead organisations behind the State of Nature report – who, in his own words, “realised that it might also be important to produce the food and the other agricultural products that people require on as little land as possible, and to use as much of the spared land as possible for large blocks of the natural habitats that many wild species need.”

Indeed, support for a land-sparing approach was also a central recommendation of independent land use research recently commissioned by the RSPB, alongside the National Trust and Wildlife Trusts, which recommended taking 25% of currently farmed land out of production by 2050. The research was, however, misrepresented by the three NGOs as advocating ‘£4.4bn for nature-friendly farming’, when in fact its findings suggested that at least half the budget should be spent on taking farmland out of production.

Science for Sustainable Agriculture has called on these NGOs to ‘come clean’ on the report’s findings, and to acknowledge the need for a corresponding increase in food production on the remaining farmland. Otherwise, as Professor Balmford and environmental economist Professor Ian Bateman warned recently in Nature, an increased requirement for food imports could mean even greater harm to biodiversity, climate impact and environmental degradation elsewhere.

For Britain to realise its potential in terms of balancing food production, environmental protection and climate change objectives, scientific rigour and evidence must guide our approach to the development of future farm policies. There is an urgent need for a fundamental rethink of the funding and direction of England’s Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs), much of which is currently focused on rewarding lower-yielding farming systems. In particular, greater emphasis is needed on encouraging the high-tech, low-impact farming technologies and practices which will help deliver high-yield food production on a smaller footprint, while also meeting the UK Government’s Food Strategy commitment to maintain current levels of domestic food production.”

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