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## Pro-science think-tank slams food health report for unsubstantiated claims about the impact of modern farming

There are genuine concerns about the human, social and economic costs of diet-related health problems such as obesity and diabetes, but in making sweeping and unsubstantiated claims about modern farming practice to support calls for radical change to the food system, a new report from the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) is a missed opportunity, says pro-innovation think-tank Science for Sustainable Agriculture (SSA).

For example, the executive summary of the FFCC report, entitled *"The False Economy of Big Food and the case for a new food economy"*, states that: "Fertilisers, pesticides and chemical additives introduce toxins into the food chain. The combined effect on our health is devastating."

But not a single shred of evidence is presented in the report to support the claim that fertiliser use or pesticide residues in food are driving up the costs of health and social care, welfare spending or productivity losses.

On the contrary, there is very good evidence to suggest that fuelling unfounded concerns about pesticide residues on fresh produce contributes to reduced fruit and vegetable consumption among consumers, putting them at greater risk of actual health problems instead.

In other words, as the UK Food Standards Agency repeatedly emphasises, *"On the best science available, no harm will come to people who consume an amount of pesticide that is below the safety limits for that pesticide. The risk to health from eliminating fruit and vegetables from the diet would far outweigh the risks posed by possible exposure to pesticide residues."*.

Similarly, pointing consumers towards much higher priced organic or agroecologically produced fruit and veg, in line with the FFCC's mission to support a 'transition to agroecology', will also reduce consumption among those less able to afford it. In doing so, FFCC is, in effect, calling for a 'food poll tax' when there is no consistent, substantiated evidence that organic food is any healthier or more nutritious than its conventionally produced equivalent (eg see for example Is organic better? — Harvard Gazette).

As such, this latest report is little more than another, thinly-veiled attack on modern, science-based agriculture, which in fact has helped ensure that we are living longer, healthier lives, and that we are producing food more sustainably, more efficiently, and on a smaller footprint than at any time in human history.

Innovation in plant breeding continues to provide higher yielding crops that keep food prices down and, at the same time, produce new innovative varieties of fruits (eg new crunchy and attractive varieties of apple, seedless mandarins) and vegetables (cherry tomatoes, snacking cucumbers) that encourage consumers to eat more healthily. New breeding technologies such as genome editing could help accelerate this trend, for example seedless blackberries, pitless cherries and tastier mustard greens are already either available or nearing commercialisation in other parts of the world.

As commentators on Science for Sustainable Agriculture have previously pointed out, when one in four people in the UK go to bed hungry every night there is something rather grotesque about campaigns which misrepresent modern farming systems and encourage people who cannot afford it to pay much, much more for their food.

**ENDS**

**Notes**
Science for Sustainable Agriculture (SSA) is a new policy and communications platform, offering a focal point for information, comment and debate around modern, sustainable agriculture and food production. Supported by an independent advisory group of political, scientific and industry leaders from a range of sectors and backgrounds, SSA's aim is to promote a conversation rooted in scientific evidence, rather than ideology. Science for Sustainable Agriculture provides a platform for like-minded individuals and organisations to champion and explain the vital role of science and technology in safeguarding our food supply, tackling climate change and protecting the natural environment, as well as to expose, comment on and challenge unscientific positions or policy decisions in relation to sustainable agriculture.

Further information about Science for Sustainable Agriculture is available here.

**Contact:**
Daniel Pearsall, co-ordinator
E: press@scienceforsustainableagriculture.com
M: 07770 875455