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| **Press Release** | 09/05/23 |

Calls to build resilient food production system echoed across the food sector

On a sunny Spring evening in the heart of the Cotswolds, a chef, NGOs, civil servants, educators and farmers came together to share food and perspectives at a dinner to discuss the future of sustainable food and farming. The dialogue was intended as a proactive call for the food and agricultural value chains to build a more resilient food system.

Brought together by BASF over a shared passion for food, farming and the environment, the diverse group called for three areas of impact – the need for education to address the disconnect between food and farming, the encouragement of consumers to consider their role in sustainable food choices and the need to change the narrative around fresh vs processed foods.

Hosted at FarmED, a community and education site in Oxfordshire founded by Ian and Celene Wilkinson in 2021 which aims to explore ways to combine all farming approaches for a more sustainable and healthy food system, the venue provided the ideal backdrop to the first ‘Biggest Job on Earth’ dinner. Throughout the evening, guests heard from unique voices sharing their challenges and opportunities for the future of food production.

Invited to share her perspective on the pressures of land use, Farmer Sarah Bell discussed the challenges and contributions that farmers need to make;

“For me, the challenges are complex, ranging from the increase in urbanisation and warehouse construction and resulting water run-off. Planting trees as a licence to continue to pollute, non-production interventions for land use and renewables schemes making communities hot under the collar. As farmers we also need to be providing year-round, long-term employment, to deal with forced land use changes resulting from the climate and responding to what society wants from land.”

Sarah added that what society mustn’t lose sight of through the “farmers’ lens for survival is that they are intimately, and viscerally connected to land,” and that society and politics’ polarisation and post-truth is driving short-termism.

“Farmers are about to enter a social contract for public good from public investment; what we must have, is scientific baselining for this, and to bear in mind that urban society still expects shelves to be stacked, and we can’t expect retail giants to be responsible for the levers in our food system, food policy must take the supply chain limitations into consideration.”

Identifying ways to bridge the gap between farming and the food we eat, Chef & Founder of Sorted Food Ben Ebbrell addressed the impact of influencers to drive positive change, sharing information about sustainable food production in the context of food choices matters, as does the consciousness of consumers’ purchase decisions:

“Our hope is that [SortedFood] inspires and shares information with our community and we hope that a nugget of information will encourage them to share what they have learnt and make a different choice. We are a group of friends who met at secondary school, and we listen, distil, curate, and connect with our community.

“However, when we look outside our world, I could become very negative, very quickly, because of the food choices that the world imposes, fast versus fresh food and the widening ‘say versus do’ gap.”

Ben added that, when it comes to sustainability, there is “deadlock” – despite all those with marketing budget talking about it, “we are not shifting the dial”. His advice to the farming sector is not to use experts who are untouchable and unreachable, but to find communities that want to engage and listen by creating engaging content that is editorial, not advertising.

To close the evening, attendees heard from Emeritus Professor of Food Marketing at Imperial College London and International Speaker Prof David Hughes who highlighted that the challenges the farming sector currently faces are not new;

“Food price inflation is running at 19% and energy inflation is also still high, the same happened in 1973 when there was a harvest collapse in Russia and Ukraine. Food price spikes are the victim of the market, and the issue of heat versus eat will last another 18 months.

“The result is people have to make the decision to eat less, or eat less healthily, for example an Aldi loaf costs 49p, a frozen pepperoni pizza, 70p. There is a misconception that fresh food is more expensive, a six-pack of Tesco apples sells a single apple at 16p, and a single British apple at 18p.”

“We’ve seen failures in the UK’s pig and poultry sectors, and arguably in fruit and veg; UK retailers have long-term contracts with suppliers which they haven’t altered as things have changed. My prediction is that one of the major retailers might fall.”

Leading the call for education to address the disconnect between food and farming was Claire Evans, Head Teacher Eaton Valley Primary in West Bromwich. Concerned that agriculture isn’t currently on the school curriculum, Claire reiterated the importance of schools engaging and involving pupils in understanding how their food is produced and how to prepare and cook it.

Annabel Shackleton from Linking Environment And Farming added that the work being done via LEAF Open Farm Sunday, farming toolkits for schools and educational visits is invaluable for the future of farming.

“Earlier this year LEAF Education relaunched the free ‘Why Farming Matters’ resources for schools, supported by BASF. Today’s school children are tomorrow’s farmers, consumers, parents, politicians, leaders, and thinkers. They are the ones who will need to meet current and future challenges, whether that be the climate crisis or feeding and ever-growing population. With young people and schools keener than ever to connect with food production, farming and nature we aim to inform, engage and inspire them. This resource pack will deepen their understanding of the role of farming in the UK, discover its powerful impacts, and be encouraged to ask questions and begin to find out and formulate their own understanding of Why Farming Matters.”

Echoing the need for education and public engagement, Sarah Bell summed up the totality of what needs to come next;

“The farming industry needs a science-led approach, a network for water distribution, near market science and long term, pragmatism; and that the sector needs to be brave, imaginative, innovative and change the rule book, which happens when we have a ’burning platform’, in other words, when we are under pressure, which we are now.”

Ali Milgate from BASF, who facilitated the evening’s discussions, said: “Conversation is at the heart of understanding, and the event allowed diverse views and thoughts to be shared. Our intention for hosting was to hear people’s hopes, ideas and asks to make food, farming, and the environment work hand in hand. People have made new connections and will continue to strive for change outside of the forum. We feel proud to have stimulated and celebrated a shared passion for the biggest job on earth.

The event was hosted as part of BASF’s Farming the Biggest Job on Earth campaign which provides a platform to advocate for farmers and farming and promote the vital impact, they have of food production and stewardship of the natural environment. To find out more <https://www.agricentre.basf.co.uk/en/Biggest-Job-on-Earth/Biggest-Job-on-Earth/>