

# AFTER FMD: AIMING FOR A VALUES-DRIVEN AGRICULTURE



**FOOD ETHICS  
COUNCIL**

THE INDEPENDENT COUNCIL FOR ETHICAL  
STANDARDS IN FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

## A FOOD ETHICS COUNCIL REPORT

British agriculture is in crisis. Although the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak was not the root of the current problems it has exacerbated them: and as a result countless reports have appeared making proposals on how UK agriculture must be reformed. Our justification for adding to this plethora of advice is that few, if any, of these reports discuss the problems and their proposed solutions in the terms which we believe are crucially important, namely, in ethical terms.

Unfortunately, the domination of contemporary thought by the languages of *hi-tech* and *global market economics* has led to an almost total marginalisation of *ethical* perspectives. This is because even in educated, perhaps *primarily* in educated, sections of society, people assume that ‘ethics’ is only concerned with the emotional and the irrational. For example, in discussions of the impacts of certain technological innovations it is not unusual to see these listed as ‘economic, safety, environmental and *ethical*.’

But what can such a listing imply? Could it mean that it is acceptable for us to countenance *unethical* economics, *unethical* safety and *unethical* environmental protection measures? And if ‘ethics’ is to be isolated in such a way, what could it refer to? All too often, it seems, to mere sentiment, irrationality or religious scruples. Such narrow interpretations of ethics are, decidedly, not what we have in mind here.

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

In this report, the issues raised are explored by applying a set of ethical principles (respect for wellbeing, autonomy and justice) to the interests of four groups, namely:

- People who work in the agricultural and food industries (e.g. farmers, agricultural suppliers, food manufacturers, retailers, traders and caterers).
- Citizens (all of us, both as consumers and as participants in democratic society)
- Farm animals
- The Ecosystem: encompassing all organisms (including the human population, domesticated and wild species) considered collectively, as interrelated species, breeds and populations

Because the three principles and four interest groups interact, the resulting twelve ethical impacts can be represented in the form of a table, called the Ethical Matrix, which facilitates discussion of the issues by arranging them in a rational structure (see overleaf).

“Another excellent  
report from the  
Food Ethics Council.”

Colin Tudge

science author and journalist



## THE ETHICAL MATRIX

Respect for:	WELLBEING	AUTONOMY	JUSTICE
PEOPLE IN THE AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD INDUSTRIES	Satisfactory income and working conditions	Appropriate freedom of action	Fair trade laws and practices
CITIZENS	Food safety and acceptability Quality of life	Democratic, informed choice e.g. of food	Availability of affordable food
FARM ANIMALS	Animal welfare	Behavioural freedom	Intrinsic value
THE ECOSYSTEM	Conservation	Biodiversity	Sustainability

*This shows, in twelve individual cells, the interpretation of respect for the principles of wellbeing, autonomy and justice in terms appropriate to the interests of people working in the agricultural and food industries, citizens, farm animals and the ecosystem, respectively. For the first two interest groups both impacts and responsibilities are involved, whereas for farm animals and the ecosystem (shaded) only impacts of human actions are relevant.*

### What people have said about the Ethical Matrix

The value of the Matrix approach has been confirmed in several exercises in public participation, at which people have written comments such as:

- it identifies issues and focuses debate
- very good vehicle for education/discussion
- teases out issues and people's feelings
- enables a wide range of issues to be discussed
- aids the decision making process

**“The perspective of this report is unique – it should be given as wide a circulation as possible.”**

**Rev Dr Gordon Gatward, Director of the Arthur Rank Centre,  
National Agricultural Centre, Stoneleigh**



## THE REPORT'S CONCLUSIONS IN BRIEF

The need for a radical reappraisal of Government policy on agricultural practice and trade is emphasised by the Foot and Mouth disease (FMD) outbreak, together with uncertainties over global climate change and the crisis in international politics.

- UK farming and food systems need to be reconstructed on the basis of new guiding principles. The current reliance on high-external-input technology and global competitiveness is misguided. Instead of relying on a simplistic cost/benefit approach, policies should take account of widely accepted ethical principles, which, crucially, also place value on rights and fairness. Among many other advantages, adoption of the latter approach in the past would have prevented disease outbreaks such as BSE and FMD, and not only saved many lives but also many millions of pounds.
- Our recommended approach entails use of a framework, called the Ethical Matrix, to examine the impacts of change on a range of 'interest groups', namely, people in the agricultural and food industries, citizens, farm animals and the ecosystem. Based on these assessments, the report suggests that adoption of holistic, sustainable, localised systems is the most ethically acceptable way forward.
- This *values-driven* agenda emphasises quality of life, diversity and concern for the future. It places more reliance on knowledge (including, but not exclusively, scientific knowledge) as a basis for a sustainable global future, and less on physical resources. Although the promised benefits of some hi-tech systems may seem alluring, they usually perpetuate old-style industrial strategies, which tend to undermine cultural values and are wasteful of critical resources.
- The promotion of sustainable, localised agriculture, supported by appropriate technical skills, will require greater Government support through subsidies and research funding. However, this will be amply justified by the resulting social, environmental and economic benefits, as revealed by 'full cost accounting'.
- Government commitment to universal food security and sustainable systems should be reflected in a new stance in international negotiations to ensure that ameliorating the ethically unjustifiable persistence of hunger and malnutrition in many less economically developed countries is given much higher priority.

**“A fascinating and valuable approach to addressing these complex issues.”**

**Jeanette Longfield, Director of Sustain, London**



## MEMBERS OF THE FOOD ETHICS COUNCIL

**Ms Helen Browning:** (*Chair*) Organic farmer; former Chair, Soil Association

**Prof Ruth Chadwick:** Director, Institute for Environment, Philosophy and Public Policy, University of Lancaster

**Mrs Janet Graham:** (*Vice-chair*) Vice-President, National Federation of Consumer Groups, London

**Dr Peter Lund:** Senior Lecturer, School of Biological Sciences, University of Birmingham

**Prof Ben Mepham:** (*Executive Director*) Director, Centre for Applied Bioethics, University of Nottingham

**Mr Geoff Tansey:** Freelance writer and consultant, Yorkshire

**Mr John Verrall:** (*Treasurer*) Pharmaceutical chemist, Sussex

## THE FOOD ETHICS COUNCIL'S GENERAL AIMS ARE TO:

- Review developments in food and agriculture within a sound framework of practical ethics which addresses the principles of wellbeing, autonomy and justice with respect to consumers, producers, farm animals and the living environment
- Promote the incorporation of ethical thinking in decision-making in agriculture, food manufacturing and retailing
- Produce authoritative, well-researched reports, which highlight ethical concerns and make recommendations for action

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## COMPLIMENTARY COPIES OF THE FULL REPORT ARE AVAILABLE FROM:

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