



Business Forum Report, February 2021

Doing net zero well

How can food and farming businesses take practical action to 'do net zero' well?

Net zero in context

We have a climate emergency

The science of climate change is now well established. Climate change is real and human activities are the main driver. Food and farming systems are major contributors to – and will be hugely affected by – the climate emergency. A rising number of governments, trade associations and businesses have made net zero commitments. In Britain, around 90% of the population lives in areas where the local authorities have declared a climate emergency¹.

“One thing that's really good news around the climate agenda... is that the evidence that we are waking up to it is just so much stronger than it's ever been before.”

When the UK government ratcheted up its target to net zero by 2050, that was a very good step in the right direction. However, it was not enough – we all have to take urgent action in the next two to three years and, as a developed country, to strive for net zero in a shorter time frame. It was argued it is possible to do that without hardship, whilst making the country better to live in, if we are creative about it.

“The climate emergency is really one symptom of something much bigger... which is humans throwing their weight around on a fragile planet in a way that's bringing about a multitude of interconnected challenges that we need to deal with all at once.”

Bring a wide-angle lens, not tunnel vision

Looking beyond carbon, it is really important, especially with anything to do with the food agenda, to be taking a wider perspective. Food and farming businesses must take bold action to accelerate the shift to net zero. Crucially though, they should do so with a wide-angle lens, not tunnel vision in addressing the climate crisis in isolation. There is an urgent need to also address the biodiversity crisis, to ensure everyone has access to good food, to bounce back strong from the pandemic, to overcome the obesity crisis and to end inhumane treatment of farm animals. The list goes on... We can not cherry pick single issues.

¹ [Climate emergency declarations in 1,874 jurisdictions and local governments cover 820 million citizens - Climate Emergency Declaration](#)

Should everyone be ‘doing net zero’?

Whilst net zero ambitions are widely recognised to be positive moves, aspects of this remain hotly disputed. Some expect the road to net zero to be a long and winding road. The reality is that the timeframe for many net zero commitments needs to be accelerated. While a ‘net zero’ framing to addressing climate issues is becoming increasingly popular, it does not necessarily suit everyone. Sometimes questions about offsets can be a distraction and some may prefer to focus ruthlessly on reducing emissions. Some argue that the ‘net zero’ framing lets companies off the hook, by allowing them to simply offset, rather than taking action to reduce. There is a risk of net zero greenwash. Failing to cut emissions and/ or making false, misleading claims constitutes ‘doing net zero’ badly.

“Very often... I would actually rather that an organisation didn't get the net zero ticket necessarily. If that was in conflict with actually just doing the right thing in terms of their carbon emissions and... any carbon removal or land management they might be getting involved in”

What does net zero done well look like?

It must involve cutting emissions fast

There are two components to reaching net zero:

- (i) Cutting emissions (rapidly) and
- (ii) Taking carbon out of the atmosphere

The core principle is that every organisation has the responsibility to cut emissions in every aspects of its business – and that has to include the whole supply chain. Food companies should find a way of taking emissions down on a trajectory in line with the science. The Science Based Targets initiative is calling for science-based targets and insisting on them on operational carbon. However, it is really important that it is not *just* operational, but supply chain, emissions as well. Then after that, if companies want to take carbon back out of the air to get to a net zero proposition, that must be done in a very high-quality way.

When considering nature-based offsetting solutions - whether it's planting trees, peat restoration, enhanced weathering or whatever can be done in the oceans -

² All quotes highlighted in green are taken from participants at this Business Forum

the solutions turn out to be finite. The nature of the crisis that we are in is such that the world needs to 'press all those buttons anyway'. So, that is one reason why you can not trade unnecessary emissions in the first place against carbon removals, because those carbon removals already need to happen.

Offsetting isn't a substitute for cutting emissions

Offsetting has to be done right and in sympathy with the wider ecology (e.g. avoid planting non-native monocultures). Many solutions - like planting trees - are fundamentally finite as there is only so much land in the world. It is vital that only quality offsets are used. A high proportion of certified schemes do not capture the true cost of carbon. Offsetting projects need really careful vetting and certification may be necessary, but is not sufficient. As a rule of thumb, if an offsetting project looks too cheap to be good, then it probably isn't high quality enough.

How can we do net zero well?

Start with the big impacts

We are in a crisis situation. Doing an analysis of the core issues is an obvious first step. Break down all the elements, then work to do the right thing with each element. Tackle the big issues first. Address the lowest hanging fruit first that you can do really well.

Do not leave the elephants in the room unnoticed – even if you have not (yet) got a solution for them. Do address key categories such as meat and dairy. It was argued that less and better meat and dairy is probably the single most important thing to address if we want to take pressure off the whole food and land system. That does not mean zero meat and dairy; instead, it means reducing the number of animals and making sure the meat and dairy we do have is reared in the gentlest, most environmentally friendly ways possible.

“Just be brave enough to look at the issue and stare it in the face and say, okay, we're working on this one until we can find a way forward.”

It is also important to do more to significantly reduce food loss and waste, across the chain. Lots of the 'easier wins' on food waste have already been taken, but there are still lots more opportunities.

³ [Demonstrating GWP*: a means of reporting warming-equivalent emissions that captures the contrasting impacts of short- and long-lived climate pollutants - IOPscience](#) and [Guest post: A new way to](#)

Count it all – but not to the nth degree

The 'smaller wins' can make a difference too. Little by little, micro actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in your business (and in your value chains) will add up to something meaningful. Taking care of the details can demonstrate integrity.

“While strategically we will aim to go after the big stuff, we will take incredible pride as well in every little, tiny bit of carbon that we take out of this business. Any tiny portion that we can take out anywhere, a little bit of packaging, a little bit of transport, a little bit of product composition, it will all add up and it will all matter.”

It will never be possible to be 100% accurate when it comes to carbon footprinting, as there are too many variables at play. Trying to carbon footprint products with very complex supply chains is hard. Do not get too obsessed with the data, as that can lead down a rabbit hole. Broadening it out beyond carbon footprints alone is important.

“You actually can't ever put a definitive carbon number on a food, it's just too complicated.”

Carbon footprint numbers relating to food may sometimes be useful. A few restaurants for example are starting to put carbon footprint numbers on menus as a point of interest, but they have to come with really careful caveats saying they are estimates to give customers a reasonable (relative) guide.

Grouping together all greenhouse gases via a CO₂ equivalent figure may oversimplify. Some claim it can mislead and that it is important to consider different gases differently via GWP* (e.g. methane is a shorter-lived greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide),³ which could affect how we treat impacts of ruminants in particular. Others feel this development (GWP*) is not too important. It was suggested that if you only care about what the world's temperature will be like in 500 years' time, then you would perhaps ignore methane impacts. However, if you care about what it will be like in 50 years' time, then the methane should be treated as more important. Normally when we roll these gases into carbon dioxide equivalent, we look at the impact

[assess 'global warming potential' of short-lived pollutants \(carbonbrief.org\)](#)

over a 100-year period, but over a 50-year period the methane would be more or less twice as important compared to the carbon dioxide as we currently believe. It is important to add that this science is relatively new and is being considered by the IPCC.

Communicate about climate and other impacts

All businesses have a responsibility to address the climate emergency. However, when engaging the general public on climate impacts of a business or product, it has to be in a language that people understand (“It’s got to be edible”), rather than be in technical or scientific jargon. It was suggested that there are things food businesses can do to give information to customers without necessarily having to put individual carbon footprint numbers on every product. For example, whether something has travelled on an aeroplane or boat is important.

Simple traffic light systems between types of product may be helpful, as there are big differences between carbon footprints of even the most sustainably produced beef and (say) a pack of nuts. However, within the beef category, a richer storyline is needed on what’s more sustainable about some kinds of beef versus others. We need to unearth what lies behind our food, including sharing how it has been produced. Contextualising carbon footprints is so important.

When to label and when to go beyond labelling?

It was argued that current labelling laws are not good enough. There is no requirement for country of origin on something that has been processed or the last significant process happened to it in the UK which allows it to be labelled as UK. We need to know if, for example, pork on retail shelves or menus, is EU pork that has been promoted as British bacon, simply because it was cured in the UK.

There is front-of-pack nutrition labelling on products in the UK, yet there is still an obesity crisis. It works for some, but not for all. Nutrition labelling took c. 15 years to get to where it is now. We do not have the luxury of that time. Is labelling the route that people think we need to go down, or is it more campaign activity? How can we accelerate action quicker than the length of time it will take to develop a labelling scheme?

“The important thing for a business is the pressure you are exerting on the whole system – every aspect – how you lobby, how you engage your customer, what is your narrative, who are you funding?”

Integrate marketing into net zero strategies

While speed is of the essence when it comes to cutting carbon, there is a need to do it ‘properly’ and not take short cuts. Net zero commitments, actions and marketing need to be robust and authentic. It can be very helpful to get marketing departments engaged on this from an early stage so they more fully understand the nuance and can make authentic claims, rather than developing a strategy and *then* passing that on to marketing to ‘sell it’.

Honesty on the net zero agenda is critical. A company should say it is going to make mistakes. It should be honest about the things that aren’t right as well as the things that are right. The example of Brewdog was cited, where marketing around its carbon negative strategy included talking about the difference between the carbon removals it was doing and what any old offsets look like, so people can understand why it was spending more to ensure its offsets were high quality.

Every part of the sector has a role to play

Everyone must take responsibility, right across food and farming – and beyond. This includes supply chains, operations and all parts of the sector helping the general public (as food citizens) make better decisions and navigate the complexities.

Seize the opportunities in farming

There is a potential for a huge amount of carbon to be stored on farms if the method of farming is right and if soils are being produced with good organic matter.

Agriculture needs to get to net zero quicker than other sectors, as it can play an important role in capturing carbon on behalf of others.

An example was given of an organic farm with soils that have three times the average amount of organic matter in them and are storing over 100 tons of carbon per hectare. That is anywhere between 5 and 8 times the average of intensively farmed land. Greater help is needed at farm level to de-intensify production, improve soils and sequester carbon.

It will come down to what farmers are encouraged to do. It would be possible to do it now, but it may mean food will become more expensive. It was argued that the problem is farms having to produce more and more food for less money. The pressure to produce food cheaply paradoxically creates waste in the system.

Reducing inputs and energy usage on farm is vital. Renewable energy is also an important part of the mix. Progressive businesses, including farmers, are

increasingly switching away from fossil fuel dependency and committing to 100% renewable energy. One farmer shared how a wind turbine now provides around half of their farm's electricity needs. They also have solar PV, solar thermal and an air source heat pump – plus soon to be solar battery storage – which together mean that the farm should be self-sufficient for electricity next year, with all of it from renewable sources.

Some of the retailers' sustainable farmer working groups are being used to test and learn, try best practice, use new technology and innovation to understand what does and what doesn't, and then share the message and spread some of that best practice through their broader supply bases.

There should be a stronger focus from an agricultural perspective on net zero and biodiversity impacts, but also the challenge around ensuring that we continue to improve our animal welfare standards.

Change conditions so sustainability can flourish

Changing farming models can help speed up the transition to nature friendly and net zero. Increased profits from selling direct can enable livestock farmers to reduce animal numbers and stocking densities and allow them to farm the way they want.

“Who would want to milk 500 cows when you can make the same out of milking 100?”

Shorter supply chains can help farmers get more from less and mean they can afford to farm in ways with greater net profitability. Such steps can also contribute to improving agricultural biodiversity and taking positive steps on the road to net zero.

“Farming is one of the few industries where everything you produce, you're told what you're getting for it and everything you buy, you're also told what you're paying for it. It's nice to turn that on its head and say, actually, we're a business.”

Food retailers should use their power for good

As key players in the sector, supermarkets have a lot of responsibility (but not the only responsibility) to take bold action in their operations, supply chains and with engaging the public. All food retail outlets must step up. Supermarkets have got a huge role to play in making sure that their customers understand the difference between animals that have been well-reared and those that have not. Similarly, they have key parts to play in working with supply chain partners.

Foodservice sector can bounce back with net zero

The foodservice and hospitality sector has faced a very challenging year because of the pandemic. Nonetheless, many companies in the sector have taken some steps on greenhouse gas emissions reductions and will plan more in the years ahead. One problem cited was the lack of transparency in supply chains. Mid-sized wholesalers often face business buyers asking 'what is your lowest price' and having to compete on that basis. It was argued that the commercial incentives need to change to broaden beyond a narrow 'price' lens. As the sector looks to rebuild post-pandemic, how can it embrace net zero?

SMEs face a particular set of challenges

Knowing where to channel efforts is a particular challenge for small- and medium-sized food businesses. With power dynamics as they are in the sector, it can be difficult for SMEs – particularly those with large product ranges – to measure footprints and to have influence in the wider sector.

“We thought, 'Maybe there's a great big database in the sky,' which would give us an approximate figure... That database in the sky might exist for consultancy companies but it doesn't exist for us.”

One such company explained that almost all of their carbon footprint is in their supply chains. It is likely to be difficult for smaller businesses to go to suppliers to ask them to, for example, convert all their power into renewable energy. Should SMEs be investing their limited resources in offsetting?

There may be opportunities for larger food businesses to share resources – not just with small suppliers, but potentially with smaller peers too. For SMEs in particular, teaming up with others on this agenda feels particularly important. That is easy to say, but in the past has often proved difficult. Perhaps the greater collaborative spirit shown during the pandemic presents an opportunity?

Collaborate rather than compete

Whilst some compete on rival net zero claims, others are realising that much of the climate agenda can, and should, be pre-competitive and collaborative.

There are lots of groups working on measuring and reporting of emissions. Why not have a consistent methodology on data collection, so everyone in the sector works on the same basis? With so much complexity, public confidence in carbon footprinting will be damaged if companies collect, interpret and

communicate data in multiple different ways. Establishing a common framework would help.

“I can't understand why anyone would want to compete on the data. I think if we were in a position to help someone who was a bit further behind the curve, or we could take some help from someone who was further ahead than we were, I think in this whole space collaboration, honesty and transparency has got to be the right thing.”

It is possible that the UK government will consult on the idea of mandatory carbon labelling this year. If so, it will be important for food and farming businesses to engage and have their say – and as much as possible to speak with a common voice. Will there be mandatory scope three reporting from large businesses in future? Companies across the sector are not yet all fully aligned on what they need to do to get to net zero and the ways they are going to do that. Transparency, openness and honesty will be key.

“Collective action is hugely important for us. There's no way that we can deliver some of those big targets by ourselves...”

It would be better if there was some guidance on how to communicate climate information in a ‘level playing field’ way for businesses. It was argued that the sector should come up with guidelines of best practice.

Concluding comments

For all the complexity, there are some simpler messages that will get us a long way. It was argued that doing ‘less and better’ meat well is one of those. There are opportunities too to cut emissions by changing the system so there is much less food waste. Really cheap food can't be the most sustainable food. The era of cheap food is over – and we need a fair transition that ensures people are not left behind. Telling stories, raising awareness, shifting mindsets (from consumerist to food citizenship) and asking questions are vital.

There are already shining examples of companies taking positive action and good role models for others to follow. Doing net zero well must include radical emissions cuts, working with others and taking an ‘in the round’ (not a blinkered) approach.

Let's make this a collective mission to get to net zero quickly – whilst also addressing the other emergencies we face.

What next?

Tips:

- Start with the big reduction opportunities
- Count the lot – big wins and tricky details
- Take on tough issues like meat and dairy
- Involve marketing team from the outset
- Only offset if you're also taking serious action to reduce emissions. If offsetting, use quality offsets
- Be open and honest about uncertainties in claims
- Do it. Don't worry if it's not perfect. BUT be honest with yourself/ ourselves
- If net zero approach to addressing climate crisis doesn't work for you, fine – but do cut emissions

Selected key questions:

- What neutral spaces are there for food and farming companies to work together on the net zero agenda?
- How can we fast track better low impact climate options for the general public (as food citizens)?
- When should businesses compete and when should they collaborate to address the climate emergency?
- What role (if any) should there be for carbon insetting (projects that capture carbon in a business's own supply chain)?

Further resources

- [Science Based Targets initiative](#)
- [Zero Carbon Forum – hospitality sector](#)
- [WRAP supply chain emissions group](#)
- [BRC net zero climate roadmap](#)
- [SME Climate hub](#)
- [Carbon Trust](#)
- [Carbon Disclosure Project](#)
- [How to tell if a company's 'net zero' goals are greenwashing \(fastcompany.com\)](#)
- [Small World Consulting](#)
- [Gazegill Organics](#)

Other relevant Business Forum reports:

- Food, farming and climate change: from culprit to champion – link [here](#)

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 2nd February 2021. We are grateful to our speakers, **Professor Mike Berners-Lee** (leading expert in carbon footprinting, lead scientific advisor to Brewdog on its Carbon Negative strategy, author of ‘How bad are bananas? The carbon footprint of everything’ and founder of Small World Consulting) and **Ian O'Reilly on behalf of Emma Robinson** (livestock farmers, Gazegill Organics, award-winning, family-run farm, Ribble Valley in Lancashire). **Dan Crossley**, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council chaired the meeting. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley dan@foodethicscouncil.org +44 (0) 333 012 4147.