
How can food and farming research deliver for the long-term public good?

Helen Browning

Organic farmer and member of the Food Ethics Council

As a farmer, it seems everyone wants to sell you stuff that they tell you – often with little evidence – will magically increase your yields by tonnes. This was one reason why I began to farm organically. I wanted to see what I could achieve using my own resources, such as rotations, good manure management and excellent husbandry

At first it felt like a research project. I had ideas that seemed worth investigating, and questions that I wanted to answer. But support for this kind of work, which I knew would have many environmental – and potentially financial – benefits was in short supply.

There was some interest in organic methods, but it was mainly focused on policy differences rather than performance improvements. Practical work was conducted on research units rather than working farms, leading to delayed and hard-to-find results. Sometimes, as industry began to co-fund R&D, inconvenient results were smothered, with commercial partners delaying publication until they'd taken advantage of the funding. This despite public finance bearing the lion's share of the cost.

That's why I've long been keen to see two things. In applied research, I want the farmer/end user to be in the driving seat, ideally being funded to do the trials themselves, with support from scientists, as in the Soil Association's Innovative Farmers network (part of the Duchy Future Farming Programme).

For 'blue skies' research, the public should be involved in determining the work to be done. Otherwise, our new technologies will carry high levels of sunk cost that drive the need for them to succeed commercially – even though they may have little relevance to the public interest. This conflict wastes everyone's time, energy and money, when R&D could be used for the betterment of society.