# Scottish agronomy experts warn UK pesticide plan may undermine food sustainability



Scottish agronomy experts have expressed concerns that the UK’s Pesticides National Action Plan (NAP) could inadvertently undermine the sustainability of domestic food production. Greg Dawson, deputy managing director of Scottish Agronomy, has highlighted what he sees as critical shortcomings in the plan’s approach to reducing chemical pesticide use, which, he warns, might have unintended practical, economic, and environmental consequences.

Dawson acknowledges the value of Integrated Pest Management (IPM), also known as Integrated Crop Management (ICM), in promoting sustainable farming. However, he cautions against a narrow focus on chemical reduction targets that do not take into account the complexities of real-world farming. “If we focus too narrowly on chemical reduction targets without considering their real-world implications, policy makers may unintentionally make growing food in the UK less sustainable—practically, economically, and environmentally,” Dawson explained.

He noted that UK farmers have grown accustomed to the gradual reduction of available agricultural inputs, but warned that excessive regulation might push primary food production into becoming either non-viable or unattractive within the UK agricultural sector. Dawson cited Denmark’s experience following the introduction of a pesticide tax as a cautionary example, where the disincentivisation of the multisite fungicide Mancozeb led to the emergence of more aggressive strains of potato blight. These strains have spread across northern Europe, complicating disease control efforts and threatening crop yields, thereby affecting both environmental and economic sustainability.

Post-Brexit regulatory changes have also had significant impacts in the UK. The removal of plant protection products (PPPs) used to control grass weeds in winter oats, a crop with a notable health profile in Scotland, caused many farmers to cease cultivating it. “A swathe of our members stopped growing them in response,” Dawson said.

Despite these challenges, the UK has achieved substantial reductions in synthetic agricultural inputs over recent decades—by approximately 60% between 1990 and 2020. This contrasts with a global increase of 90% over the same period. Dawson underscored the important role synthetic inputs, including chemical fertilisers and pesticides, have played historically, particularly since the post-Second World War Green Revolution, which saw advances in plant breeding and crop protection that boosted yields, supported population growth, improved living standards, and kept food prices relatively low.

The NAP, while recognising IPM, does not fully appreciate that it relies on a strategic integration of multiple approaches, Dawson pointed out. “Without, or with limited, chemistry, one of the legs of the stool has gone,” he said, highlighting that crop rotation, variety choice, and drilling dates are integral components supported by plant protection products and diverse modes of action. He warned that ongoing regulatory constraints and product withdrawals erode the efficacy of chemical tools, which in turn affects the overall success of integrated strategies.

Dawson also brought attention to the complex trade-offs associated with reducing synthetic inputs. Lower yields could necessitate greater land use to sustain production levels, potentially encroaching on natural habitats. Alternatively, reduced domestic food production might lead to increased imports, thereby outsourcing the environmental impact and surrendering control over production practices, including pesticide use.

An illustrative example discussed was the production of rapeseed oil in the UK. Following the 2013 ban on neonicotinoid insecticides—due to their potential harm to bees—the UK shifted from being self-sufficient and an exporter of rapeseed to becoming heavily reliant on imports from countries where such chemicals remain permitted. This has implications for both UK food security and environmental and ethical issues abroad. Palm oil, the UK’s second most consumed vegetable oil, often originates from tropical regions where its cultivation is linked to rainforest loss and biodiversity threats.

Dawson remarked, “There are very few easy wins for policy makers or the consumers they serve without resorting to NIMBY-ism.”

He concluded by emphasising the importance of realistic, scientific approaches to sustainability in agriculture that safeguard existing effective tools. “Agriculture can never be truly ‘sustainable’ unless it is providing food security, farmer viability and resilience in the face of climate, pest, and market volatility,” he said. Pointing to future innovations like gene editing and biological inputs, Dawson stressed that these technologies still need proven field results. Meanwhile, he called for greater understanding of how pesticides contribute to sustainable food production, recommending that crop protection strategies and regulations be grounded in science rather than solely aspirational goals.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-pesticides-national-action-plan-2025/uk-pesticides-national-action-plan-2025-working-for-a-more-sustainable-future> - Corroborates the existence and objectives of the UK Pesticides National Action Plan (NAP) 2025, including its framework for sustainable pesticide use and collaboration with farmers.
* <https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/national-action-plan-for-sustainable-use-of-pesticides-published/> - Supports claims about the plan's domestic targets to reduce pesticide risks by 10% by 2030 and highlights concerns about alignment with farming practices.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nature-boost-government-launches-first-action-plan-on-pesticides-in-a-decade> - Confirms the NAP's aim to reduce environmental risk from pesticides by 10% over five years and references post-neonicotinoid ban contexts, relevant to rapeseed oil production impacts.
* <https://ppconline.org/ppc-news/uk-pesticides-national-action-plan-naps-minimal-impact-public-health-pest-management> - Reinforces the NAP's focus on reducing pesticide-related environmental risks, contextualizing concerns about regulatory impacts on agricultural sustainability.
* <https://igrownews.com/uk-government-agriculture-latest-news/> - Affirms the NAP's emphasis on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and pesticide risk reduction goals, tying to debates about chemical reduction trade-offs.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nature-boost-government-launches-first-action-plan-on-pesticides-in-a-decade> - Reiterates the NAP's acknowledgment of IPM's role in sustainable farming, supporting arguments about the plan's reliance on multi-faceted approaches.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMilwFBVV95cUxPTlhhMElTVkkwc0JHcklVVGx2Wm5FUGZtRldPOUdBRFBYSG1IWndIalN0WThRa1QtZWNfeGpMWW4xZ19XVDZwVnBMME5IMFlCSlBvc1R3UUJtRU5jZ0hXYWhSSEhWTTZmRXNNQUpVVjJ6X0VCYThjSmtnV3pfdml6VGZSOGdJMUhwREhWdTNZejZ3bGtTbTQ4?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data