

# European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture

Devoted to advancing sustainability in agriculture, President, Patrick Wrixon gives an insightful introduction to integrated farming, discussing EISA's importance in promoting and developing sustainable farming systems across Europe and detailing the progress the Initiative has made to date

Could you outline how you became involved with the European Initiative for Sustainable Development in Agriculture (EISA)?

I became involved through the national UK organisation, Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), which was a founding member of EISA. LEAF is an environmental and farming charity of which I am on the Board of Trustees as well as being a member.

What are some of EISA's main objectives? Have you made significant headway in achieving these goals?

The primary objective is to promote integrated farming (IF) throughout Europe. It is our aim to lobby at a political level so that legislation reflects the significance of IF. It is important to have partners across Europe and the globe, working together to address the challenges of developing and delivering more sustainable food and farming techniques. It is particularly helpful to have the assistance of like-minded farmers and industry members in working towards these objectives.

We have made substantial progress in building this network and establishing lines of communication between farmers, their representative ►





## ANALYSIS

bodies and our associate members from the agricultural industry. Demonstration farm visits afford the opportunity to see IF in practice, while the *Integrated Farming Framework* is a document that provides farmers with guidelines of how to engage with IF on the ground.

For those who are unaware, what is integrated farming (IF) and how does it work? Can you highlight the key benefits of such a system?

IF is a whole farm business approach that delivers sustainable farming. It uses the best of modern technology coupled with traditional methods to deliver prosperous farming that enriches the environment and engages local communities. A farm business managed to IF principles will demonstrate site-specific and continuous improvement across the whole farm addressing: organisation and planning; soil management and fertility; crop health and protection; pollution control and by-product management; animal husbandry; energy efficiency; water management; landscape and nature conservation; and community engagement.

IF means more than just keeping crops healthy, applying the right fertilisers or feeding animals properly: it is based on a holistic approach, on science-based management and on the optimal blend of experience and innovation in the continuous pattern of planning, evaluation and improved management. IF is geared towards sustaining and optimising the use of all resources on farms, including soil, water, air, staff, machinery, capital, wildlife habitats, landscape and archaeological features. It also addresses regulation and embraces innovation. Its successful uptake requires a detailed understanding of the business and an innovative and challenging approach.

The implementation of IF is all about adopting knowledge and innovation alongside beneficial husbandry principles and traditional methods. It is built around the development of a risk management approach to anticipate, assess, manage and develop contingency plans for any unplanned and/or natural events. IF uses, and encourages the continual improvement of, pest control measures that have minimal impact on the environment and human health, and which promote sustainability and profitability.

The challenges presented by an increase in population alongside decreasing available cropping areas are addressed by IF. It is the very nature of a whole farm approach, including a social element, that make this an important practical way forward for land management. Production of sufficient food versus environmental protection is a recurring refrain, and IF provides some of the solutions to this ever-increasing challenge. The fundamental approach is that of informed management across the whole farm, which focuses on attention to detail in all practices to deliver sustainable farming.

IF demonstrates that productive agriculture can be governed by an approach that protects and enhances our fragile resources. EISA is just

part of the big picture and the real challenge is to encourage a broader approach across Europe.

How is sustainable farming defined and what role does it play in sustainable development?

Sustainable farming refers to an integrated system of plant and animal production practices with a site-specific application that will, in the long term:

- Satisfy human food and fibre needs
- Enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends
- Make the most efficient use of non-renewable and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls
- Sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole

Does the agriculture industry play an important role in supporting biodiversity?

Farming and biodiversity go hand-in-hand and the agriculture industry has a crucial role to play as custodian of the countryside. Biodiversity contributes many benefits to farming, including the importance of habitats as windbreaks and protection for livestock and crops; the critical role of pollinators; the natural biological control methods from beneficial insects; and the huge knowledge and developments that we have gained in our biology and chemistry for controlling pests, weeds and diseases.

How important is collaboration with international organisations to EISA's work? Do you have any plans for exciting future partnerships?

EISA has a broad range of international partners. Our associate membership represents the crop protection, fertiliser, animal health and food industries, and includes the European Landowners Organisation. These international links are of crucial importance to EISA in forming a coordinated approach from a wide body of opinion. Our individual members also work with a range of partners. For example, at LEAF, we have partners that we work with worldwide, and LEAF Marque is a global standard. It is an independently and externally verified environmental standard that demonstrates how farmers are committed to quality food alongside environmental protection and enhancement. We are constantly looking at further collaborative work and have several projects in the pipeline but it is too early to relate details.

### EISA IN BRIEF

EISA is an association of national farmers' organisations from six EU Member States with the common aim to develop and promote IF at a European level. National member organisations are: Forum de l'Agriculture Raisonnée Respectueuse de L'Environnement (FARRE), France; Fördergemeinschaft Integrierte Landbewirtschaftung (FILL), Luxembourg; Fördergemeinschaft Nachhaltige Landwirtschaft (FNL), Germany; Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF), UK; Österreichische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Integrierten Pflanzenschutz (ÖAIP), Austria; and Odling i Balans (OdB), Sweden.

### THE BENEFITS OF IF

- Optimises crop yield and livestock performance
- Saves money
- Improves the environment
- Supports community engagement



Do you feel that the farming industry is maximising its use of renewable energies as a power supply? How viable are renewable energies when used on an industrial scale?

Farmers have embraced renewable energy but the extent of its use varies according to the incentives that different governments offer. Alternative energy is very appealing to IF businesses because it is a measurable means of reducing both the carbon footprint and fossil fuel consumption, but also produces a useful income stream. The question of land use for growing crops for fuel, eg. maize for anaerobic digesters, is yet to be fully answered but it is a matter of striking the right balance between food and energy production. This balance is manipulated by governments through subsidy of both elements and must be carefully managed. It is another example of the pressure of humankind on the planet's resources and it must be the driver for more research into the development of further technology to increase output of both food and energy in a more sustainable way.

Has the structure and work of EISA changed over the years? What future changes are in the pipeline?

EISA was set up in the early 1990s. Over that time the structure has remained fairly constant but we have increased the membership and shifted the focus towards political lobbying. We are eager to attract

more members and set up a Europe-wide network of IF Demonstration Farms so the practicalities and benefits of the system can be more widely appreciated.

To what extent is EISA concerned with public engagement?

Public engagement and building public trust and understanding is extremely important for EISA members whose commitment is demonstrated in a number of ways, such as the Farm Mobile event in Luxembourg, Green Week in Germany, and in the UK Open Farm Sunday, where 365 farms opened up their gates and welcomed the general public. In 2013 over 200,000 people ventured into the countryside to understand more about food, farming and Nature on Open Farm Sunday.



[www.sustainable-agriculture.org](http://www.sustainable-agriculture.org)



#### THE EISA INTEGRATED FARMING FRAMEWORK

A detailed document including guidelines, practices and suggestions for agricultural production, the Integrated Farming Framework covers a wide range of aspects such as soil management, animal husbandry, landscape, wildlife and biodiversity.

The Framework is to be understood and used as a tool on two different levels. For an individual farmer, the EISA Framework offers a comprehensive management tool. This aims to raise further awareness and improve everyday practices on farms in order to meet future

environmental, economic and social challenges, and hence achieve parallel progress in all dimensions of sustainable development.

The EISA Framework also presents a definition and characterisation of IF, giving the basis for a common understanding for political credibility and as the foundation of EISA itself. The Framework can help influence potential legislative incentives and/or guidelines. It can be applied all over Europe, helping to harmonise agricultural performance through its forward looking and innovative approach.