



Speak Out Toolkit

The Difficult Questions

There are so many misconceptions about farming, that occasionally you may be asked a difficult question. Below are some of the challenging questions that members of the public ask farmers. At LEAF Open Farm Sunday events, these questions are likely to be driven by genuine interest, with no hidden agenda, and by staying calm, positive and honest in your response, visitors will leave better informed and with a greater sense of trust in British Farming.

As with any difficult question or conversation, it may not be possible to reach an understanding or resolution, and you may have to agree to disagree. The trick is to stay calm and close the conversation in a polite and non-confrontational way. If it is dominating conversation at the cost of the experience of other visitors, you can offer to discuss it in more detail after the tour.

If you have a question that is not answered here and you would like help in wording a response, please email enquiries@leafuk.org. Equally, if there is a question that you are always asked, please let us know the question and how you respond so we can share it with other host farmers. Thank you.

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Questions & Answers

General Topics

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2. Why do farms smell?
3. Why are tractors so slow and hold up traffic?
4. Are you a rich farmer making lots of money? Why do you farm when so many farmers say it's unprofitable?
5. Why do farmers keep people off their land?
6. Do you agree with large-scale farming?

Sheep

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8. Why are those young lambs out in the fields in this cold/awful weather?
9. Why do you castrate lambs with castration rings and no anesthetic, isn't that cruel?
10. Won't those sheep get cold feet after they're shorn?
11. These lambs have a very short life, isn't it cruel to keep them for meat?
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23. What happens to your bull calves?
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Arable

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27. Sprays kill bees, what is your view on this?
28. It dangerous to live/walk/have schools near farmers' fields when they are spraying?
29. Why aren't you an organic farmer?
30. Why do you grow oilseed rape? It gives me hay fever.

Pigs

31. What happens to the piglets when they grow up? How do you turn them into meat?
32. Why do you keep pigs in sheds all the time?
33. Why do your pigs sleep on hard floors?

Poultry

34. Why do you keep your chickens in houses?
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Environment

36. Do you approve of wind farms?
37. Why are you paid to plant hedges and trees?
38. Farmers are responsible for a big decline in bird numbers, particularly species on the red and amber list, how would you respond to this criticism?
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41. Why do you want to kill badgers?

Questions & Answers

General Topics

1. Why do farmers get paid subsidy when other industries don't?

There are many reasons, which all stem from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which is a series of policies managed by the European Union. These include:

- Keeping the price of food lower. Typically, UK citizens spend just 7% of their annual incomes on food, versus 40% in the 1940s.
- To support livelihoods to retain people living in rural places.
- To support the management of the countryside for a host of targets, including wildlife, invertebrates (e.g. bugs and bees), birds, public access, soils, water quality, flood mitigation and many more.
- To support education of children and the wider public.

2. Why do farms smell?

At certain times of the year, for example in the winter when cattle are inside, or when the wind is blowing in a certain direction, such as towards your house, or when farmers are doing certain things such as spreading muck or slurry, smells can waft from farms.

These smells are harmless and generally come from farm animals, their feed e.g. silage (pickled grass) or from other facilities on some farms e.g. an anaerobic digester used to break down organic wastes.

It is very hard for farmers to control these odours, just as it is for a sewage treatment plant and for humans when they use the bathroom for number twos!

3. Why are tractors so slow and hold up traffic?

Tractors and other farm vehicles are built for power, not for speed. Some vehicles are also restricted on how fast they can travel. Farmers sometimes have to take farm vehicles such as tractors or combine harvesters on the road, for example to move them from field to field. Most farmers are very conscious and try to pull over into laybys to let other road users past. This isn't always possible to do. We ask that you be patient, usually they won't be going far!

4. Are you a rich farmer making lots of money? Why do you farm when so many farmers say it's unprofitable?

Some years we make a profit, in other years, for example when it rains during harvest, or when the market prices are low, we can lose money. Farming is a business, just like your local garage or your local shop. Like them, we need to make a profit to invest in new tools, training, to pay wages or to buy a new pair of wellington boots [hold up an old sole-less pair to make light of the question].

We carry on farming because this farm has been in the family for many years [tell your own farm story] and because we love it, it's our way of life. We also believe in caring for the countryside and take pride in producing great quality food.

5. Why do farmers keep people off their land?

Many farmers openly welcome people onto parts of their farms e.g. footpaths or to events like LEAF Open Farm Sunday. In Scotland, they have a 'right to roam' law which allows wider countryside access.

There are many reasons why farmers ask the public to keep to the footpath, or away from certain parts of the farm, for example to keep you and your family safe. If there are new mother cows with calves, they can be protective and frightening if you get too close. There may be machinery working in a field, or trees being felled, so farmers ask that you keep away for your own safety. It is also to protect sheep from dogs being walked on farms. Dogs, even if they don't usually chase, can chase sheep and, in some cases, maul younger sheep and lambs and even kill them or cause pregnant ewes to miscarry.

6. Do you agree with large-scale farming?

[We are/aren't large scale farmers. Tailor how you answer depending on this but try not to undermine other systems.]

Larger scale farming has become necessary in today's society. People have become used to low food prices. It isn't economically possible for farmers to do this in a free-range chicken system, or grazing beef cattle on grass, which is why free-range chicken in the supermarket is significantly more expensive than non-free-range.

But large-scale farming doesn't mean bad farming. There will be very high standards of health and animal welfare, the animals' diets will be very closely tailored to their needs and their environment (e.g. temperature, ventilation, bedding) will be comfortable for them.

If we didn't 'do' large scale farming in the UK, it is likely that more cheap food would be imported from abroad where we have less control over the standards of welfare or production.

If, as a consumer, you want to support smaller scale producers, go to a farmers' market, butcher or farm shop and find out who and how your food is produced, then make a decision about which system you approve of and whose produce you want to buy.

In a supermarket, you will also have choice – for example, there are welfare- and environmentally-friendly brands such as LEAF Marque, RSPCA Freedom Food and Free-Range, all of which are independently assessed and have unique guarantees about how that food is grown or reared.

If you are concerned, do more research and ask more questions, then base your buying decisions on what you discover.

Sheep

7. Why are those sheep lame, can't you do anything to help them?

Lameness in sheep can be a problem, just as aches, pains and infections can be in humans or pets.

In sheep, it can be from bacterial or fungal infections, from old age, or an old injury.

We treat all of our sheep for lameness by keeping their feet well-trimmed (like cutting your toenails) and treating them if they do become infected. It can take them a long time to recover, unfortunately, some don't, and we need to put them to sleep.

8. Why are those young lambs out in the fields in this cold/awful weather?

Sheep are outdoor animals and they belong outside. They mainly eat grass, so they need to be in fields. Sheep have lanolin in their wool, which is greasy and protects their skin from getting too wet. Their woolly fleeces keep them warm. Lambs can feel the cold, so will seek shelter from their mothers, behind hedges or walls.

9. Why do you castrate lambs with castration rings and no anaesthetic, isn't that cruel?

The castration rings can only be used in the first week after the lamb is born. They work by cutting off the blood supply to the testicles. The lambs will feel the pressure of the ring initially, but very quickly the area becomes numb. Without a blood supply, the testicles will shrink and then drop off.

10. Won't those sheep get cold after they're shorn?

Sheep have lanolin in their wool, which is greasy and protects their skin from getting too wet, even after they are shorn. If we don't shear them, they overheat in the summer.

11. These lambs have a very short life, isn't it cruel to keep them for meat?

We look after the lambs very well while they are with us, and give them lots of space and freedom to roam, and we make the next stage of the process as stress-free as possible. Lamb tends to be a more popular meat than mutton, which comes from older sheep.

12. Why is lamb [meat] so expensive?

Early lamb, i.e. lamb for Easter, is expensive because the lambs are reared during the winter, when the costs of feeding and housing them is more expensive. Lamb is also expensive because there is a comparatively small amount of edible meat – there is typically 50% 'waste', compared to just 25% waste from a pork carcass.

13. Why do sheep have that colour on their backs?

When the male sheep are out in the fields with the female sheep, they wear one of these raddles [show them]. When they mate with the female sheep, they leave a colour on their backs. We change the colour of the raddle every 17-18 days to tie in with the egg production cycle of the female sheep. This way we know when the tup has performed!

14. How long is the pregnancy of a sheep?

147 days, or 5 months.

15. You ear-tag sheep, why and isn't it cruel?

Ear tags are very important in all livestock. They identify each individual, so that we can track their movement from one farm to another all through its life. This is actually a government requirement. Ear-tags are good as they are easy to read and secure so that they don't fall out (though they do occasionally!). It is a bit like having your ears pierced, a quick nip and initial discomfort when it's done and then it recovers quickly.

Knowing an animal's identity is important for everyone in the food chain. The origins of our meat, eggs or dairy products is important if there are any food safety issues that need to be traced back through the supply chain.

Beef

16. I've heard that red meat is bad for you, what would you say to defend your position as a farmer supplying red meat?

Some people choose to eat, and really enjoy red meat. Some people eat it for health reasons, for example someone with anaemia might eat it to boost their iron consumption.

Eaten in moderation, red meat can be an important part of our diets. Red meat does contain higher saturated fat than, for example chicken, so some doctors recommend limiting red meat consumption to once a week and cutting off excess fat. Like most things, it is good in moderation and as part of a balanced diet.

17. Cattle produce a lot of methane and are bad for the environment, shouldn't we move to a diet with less reliance on meat and dairy to help farming's carbon footprint?

Some people choose to eat, and really enjoy red meat and dairy products. Some people eat it for health reasons, for example someone with anaemia might eat it to boost their iron consumption and growing children drink milk to boost their calcium intake.

There are also parts of the UK where we cannot successfully grow vegetable-based diets because soils are poor, and the climate is more wet, such as in parts of Scotland, Wales and south-west England. In these regions, farms can easily grow grass. Humans don't eat grass, but cows and sheep do. If we didn't have cows and sheep in these areas, there would be limited, or no food produced from the land.

18. Why is beef so expensive?

The price of beef relates to the market price (supply and demand), the cost of rearing it (its food and housing) and the amount of edible meat produced from each animal (typically 45% of a beef carcass is inedible e.g. bones). You will often see beef on a menu that is 21- or 28- day hung, and this process also needs resources (eg labour, electricity) which all adds to the cost.

19. Why do you leave your animals outside in the snow/rain/cold?

Cattle are outdoor animals and mainly eat grass, so they need to be in fields for this. During the late autumn, winter and early spring, they are housed in big buildings to keep them warmer and fed whilst there is no grass growing, and also to prevent too much poaching of the ground – that's a technical term for the damage done to grass and soil underneath by livestock which are allowed to stand and walk on it for prolonged periods in wet weather. In the winter cattle are fed silage and grains. Silage is pickled grass and the grains are like cow's muesli – a mixture of barley, vitamins and minerals, and soya.

20. Isn't the poaching that cattle cause bad for the soil?

Most farmers keep their cattle in buildings in the winter, so that soil isn't damaged during wet weather. Where cattle are kept out of doors and the field is damaged, the soil will recover over time.

Dairy

21. Where do cows go in winter?

Cows are outdoor animals and the main part of what they eat is grass, so they need to be in fields for this. During the late autumn, winter and early spring, they are housed in big buildings to keep them warmer and fed whilst there is no grass growing. Dairy cows also don't need to walk so far to the milking parlour.

22. Why don't baby calves stay with their mothers?

We keep dairy cows to produce milk, so we separate the cows from their calves so that we can supply milk for you to drink and to add to your breakfast cereals. The calves are very well looked after with other calves, fed milk formula, like human babies sometimes are. We keep some of the calves to become our milking cows and to have their own calves when they are older.

23. What happens to your bull calves?

The male calves are reared for the beef market, which is done on farms called 'beef farms'.

24: Cows produce a lot of methane and are bad for the environment, shouldn't we move to a diet with less reliance on dairy to help farming's carbon footprint?

Some people choose to eat, and really enjoy dairy products. Some people eat it for health reasons, for example growing children drink milk to boost their calcium intake.

There are also parts of the UK where we cannot successfully grow vegetable-based diets because soils are poor, and the climate is wetter, such as in parts of Scotland, Wales and south-west England. In these regions, farms can easily grow grass. Humans don't eat grass, but cows do. If we didn't have cows and sheep in these areas, there would be limited, or no food produced from the land.

Arable

25. Why do you spray the crops ?

Like plants in your garden, vegetable crops can be susceptible to diseases and pests. We may also want to control weeds, as a gardener might do in their flower beds. We spray the crops to control diseases, pests or weeds and to make sure that we don't waste crops that succumb to a disease such as blight in potatoes.

26. What do you think about GM crops?

GM, or biotechnology, is a technology that can be useful in some situations. For example, in very dry countries, biotechnology can help plants to become more resilient to drought. In parts of the world that are very dry, GM crops could mean the difference between being able to grow crops, or not.

27. Sprays kill bees, what is your view on this?

Farmers have changed many of their spraying practices to minimize the impact on bees, for example, using biological control, such as introducing a small worm, called a nematode, that is specifically bred to kill slugs by burrowing into them and eating them from the inside out! Also, if farmers do apply an insecticide to a crop, they are advised to spray these at night when the bees aren't active.

28. Is it dangerous to live/walk/have schools near farmers' fields when they are spraying?

Crop protection products are rigorously tested, even more so than drugs for human beings, before they are considered safe to apply to field crops.

29. Why aren't you an organic farmer?

I have chosen not to be, but I do follow many of the principles of integrated farming which uses the best of modern technology and farming methods such as looking after my soils, using farm animal muck as fertiliser and biological control for pests.

30. Why do you grow oilseed rape? It gives me hay fever.

Oilseed rape is an important crop for us. We supply it to companies who crush it for biodiesel, cooking oils or industrial lubricants. It is also important for our crop rotation, because we harvest it early in the summer, making it easier for us to do all the cultivation that we need to drill our following crop ahead of the winter. Hay fever may also be triggered by flowering grasses, rather than oilseed rape.

Pigs

31. What happens to the piglets when they grow up? How do you turn them into meat?

Pigs are reared for pork or pork products, such as sausages, or bacon.

32. Why do you keep pigs in sheds all the time?

Pigs are sensitive to cold and wet weather, and also heat, so we keep them sheltered in a temperature-controlled environment.

33. Why do your pigs sleep on hard floors?

The slatted floors pigs sleep on mean that we can keep them clean and dry, as well as healthy. The houses they are kept in are warm and dry and they are comfortable and well cared for. Pig farming also requires us, as farmers to keep our costs very low, this is another way of ensuring that we can produce to the prices consumers are willing to pay.

Poultry

34. Why do you keep your chickens in houses?

Our chickens are well fed, warm and dry in this temperature-controlled environment. Poultry farming requires many farmers to keep costs very low, this is another way of ensuring that we can produce to the prices consumers are willing to pay.

35. Do you routinely feed your chickens antibiotics?

We only use antibiotics for our chickens when they have a treatable infection, just as the doctor would for you if you need them.

Environment

36. Do you approve of wind farms?

Renewable energy is nothing new on farms. For hundreds of years farmers have produced energy – oats to feed horses as well as wood to heat houses. Wind power has also been used for years, to power pumps for example. Renewables are part of the Government's goals to reduce the country's carbon footprint.

37. Why are you paid to plant hedges and trees?

Farmers' single farm payment (support) is linked to them undertaking many different activities e.g. planting trees, opening up footpaths, planting wildflower meadows for birds and bees all which support our natural environment now and for the future.

38. Farmers are responsible for a big decline in bird numbers, particularly species on the red and amber list, how would you respond to this criticism?

Many species of birds have increased, whilst some have decreased. There are many reasons for the change in bird populations, for example, a wet spring can reduce successful hatchings of young birds, cold winters can severely impact the survival rates of small birds like wrens and goldcrests. Farmers are actively engaged with creating habitat for birds, feeding birds over winter and creating spaces for birds, such as skylarks, to nest.

39. Farmers pollute rivers and streams with muck/pesticides, what are you doing to make sure this doesn't happen from your farm?

We implement lots of good practices on the farm to minimize our environmental impact and water courses. These include not applying autumn weed control products to the crop when there is any risk of the product getting into rivers, such as when fields are wet. We only spread muck when fields are dry, we wash out our sprayers in special areas where the water is collected in tanks and disposed of safely.

Sporting/hunting

40. Why do you shoot pheasants?

Like fishing, pheasant shooting is a country pursuit that some people choose to do. Many people who shoot aren't farmers. Teachers, doctors, lawyers and many other people in society enjoy this sport. The pheasants are reared specifically for shoots. Some people who shoot pheasants make part of their living from supplying pheasants (game) to butchers and restaurants.

41. Why do you want to kill badgers?

Badgers have been proven to carry tuberculosis (TB) and the UK food standards will not allow animals with TB to supply our food chain. TB affects cows (milk and beef), deer (venison) and goats (milk and meat).

Find the full LEAF Speak Out Communications Toolkit at
www.farmsunday.org



**Speak Out
Toolkit**

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