With a radical reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), farmers are aiming to embrace profitable production alongside environmental challenges, but at what cost? As we move towards more sustainable farming systems, how do we generate income from the environment? Farmers increasingly need to be prepared to meet future challenges through better efficiency, market opportunities and communication, and by striving for sustainable consumption.

It is in addressing some of the above aspects that the work of IGER North Wyke has an important role to play in helping farmers and the industry to be prepared for the future. The big issue is the pressure that farming faces from all sides. While farming provides many of the solutions for ensuring sustainable rural communities and urban health, so too does it contribute through certain practices to the negative impact on the environment. Getting the balance right is a fine art of integrating the strands of sustainable development: environmental delivery, social involvement, meeting the political agenda and, of course, aiming to ensure an economic return from the farm. While these seemingly logical expectations are fine on paper, delivering them on the ground is a very different matter and scientists at North Wyke have, over the last 25 years, been contributing to that need.

As society across the globe becomes more urbanised and wealthy, production industries are replaced by service ones, the farming and rural message is lost among advertising for consumer goods and politicians have to meet stronger and tougher targets across Europe. As a result, rural industry is seen as an easy option to trade on global terms, and priorities for biodiversity and environmental health increase. The question arises - How do we effectively cost the contribution and importance of rural industry as an essential component of the deeper and longer-term issues of sustainable development?

North Wyke’s work has a worldwide reputation, and while the original focus on helping farmers to maximise returns was the continuation of a post-World War II priority, today’s needs are very different. Providing the innovation and scientific robustness at multiple levels is a big challenge and one that North Wyke staff have readily taken up. Whether it is assisting in the development of policy across the UK and Europe, developing molecular technology, or helping farmers deliver economic and environmental returns, North Wyke has been quick to adapt to current issues as a leader and/or partner in research projects or through KT initiatives such as the Grassland Challenge in South West England.

At LEAF we greatly value our partnership with IGER, not only through the input from the scientists on a technical front, but also with two of the IGER sites (North Wyke and Bronydd Mawr) being LEAF Innovation Sites, where science and farming meet. For the last 15 years LEAF has been developing...
tools and advice for farmers to implement sustainable agriculture, backed by sound science. The thrust of the work of LEAF has been geared towards promoting Integrated Farm Management (IFM) and, in particular, the opportunities that better business management and attention to detail offer. IFM is a system of agriculture that is more sustainable for the environment, more profitable over the long term, encourages biodiversity, and which produces safe, affordable food. It provides a framework on which to build a sound future for agriculture and the countryside. While IGER’s focus is not on IFM per se, North Wyke research on, for example, grassland, manures and soil and water management, directly informs IFM.

The two IGER LEAF Innovation Centre sites provide a unique focus for farmers. The 200 ha grassland (+ 50 ha deciduous woodland) farm at North Wyke provides opportunities for farmers to get to grips with many of the current priorities the industry is facing following the CAP reform. These include the requirements of good agricultural and environmental practice relating to sustainable grassland-based livestock production systems, soil and nutrient management, environmental impacts of livestock production on water and the atmosphere, efficient use of farm manures and other residues, improved grassland management, incorporating grazing animal behaviour, pasture utilisation and biodiversity.

While farmers look set to get payments to support the demand for improved environmental protection and creation of biodiversity, the next great challenge is for us to demonstrate delivery of these goods. It will be necessary to maintain a level of support for the countryside, landscape and biodiversity, and also to work through solutions for delivering sustainable consumption. The work of North Wyke and the partnership it has developed with LEAF as an Innovation Centre is focused on the fine tuning of the farm business, aiming for better efficiency, delivering costs savings, regulatory compliance and pollution avoidance.

While most of IGER’s work has been geared towards demonstration within the farming and rural industry, increasingly it will be important to connect all the way through the food supply chain. LEAF is pleased to be working with North Wyke on the ‘Speak Out’ Initiative, a communication tool we have developed to enhance the energy and enthusiasm to take forward the skills of the industry, build bridges and gain public trust. There is a great opportunity to deliver a common message to all visitors to the countryside, whether they are part of school groups, those engaged in country pursuits or those visiting LEAF Innovation Centres and Demonstration farms. The LEAF and IGER partnership is just part of the picture but we have some good experience to build on. In future we intend to create a better dialogue and understanding of the farming industry and address another critical component in the delivery of sustainable development – sustainable consumption. We are at the dawn of a new farming era with a strong focus on making sustainable development happen. Science and technology is vital in order to address the global issues on a local scale, and the work at North Wyke is well placed in connecting science with farmers, policy makers and consumers in a changing rural infrastructure.