**Commentary from Jon Williams, BASF Head of Public and Government Affairs UK and Ireland ahead of NFU Conference**

How we decide to use our land must surely be one of the biggest decisions a country can collectively make, and, ahead of the @NFU Conference, navigating the current direction of policy travel for food, farming and land-use is dominating many of the UK farming sector’s conversations, and rightly so. Now is the right time to have open and frank conversations about the future of farming.

Central to the narrative is the need for clarity on the government’s vision for agriculture and horticulture, because clarity drives the confidence to invest and make positive business choices. The reverse is also true, the lack of clarity is often cited as the biggest impediment on business confidence, and without the latter, why would a company invest in the UK?

The consultation on the Land Use Framework is a good thing, because the Government is asking the industry, and the public, for views on how the UK can marry up what land delivers to balance the production of quality food, and environmental and social goods, with the need for more housing, infrastructural improvements and sustainable energy, transport and water supplies.

Inevitably there will be trade-offs to balance all the asks of the limited land area we have and to ensure that the UK meets its biodiversity and climate mitigation targets by 2030. Implications of the last UK budget may force changes in land availability and in its use, changing some of the balance of food vs energy vs environmental vs societal needs.

One thing that is crucial amid the discussion is to not lose sight of where farmers earn their main income – from growing profitable crops, livestock and energy generation. If we want to take land out of production for ‘other things’, are we happy to reduce our food security to do so? Or do we recognise the need to concomitantly increase our productivity to mitigate the loss of farmed land. This is where the policy on productivity is so central to our ‘where next’.

The impetus on developing technologies and innovations to drive yield from the most productive land has to be firm, and we need to have frank and open conversations about the merits of introducing tools such as gene editing, the impact and role of low input and output systems have on production and ensuring that existing technologies critical to productivity, such as crop protection products are retained.

Clarity isn’t just the need for farmers, it is also vital for our own business. Agriculture is a sector to which we are committed; in 2023 BASF invested €900 million in agricultural R&D, ensuring that we continue to develop new active ingredients, improved formulations and integrated crop protection strategies to support farmers to deliver the technical performance that they need to drive profitability.

So, the first ask of the DEFRA Secretary of State at the NFU gathering should be, what does UK food security mean? Is it resilient and fair supply chains? Is it the production of enough food, more of certain products or is it nationalised food production? And, in answering these questions right now, what are the UK’s wider ambitions for improving our climate and nature performance?

Finally, into the mix, the world trade dynamics offer vital context, because reducing the UK’s agricultural production potential capability places even more reliance on trading partners to supply more food, and risks just exporting our food environmental footprint – with an increasingly volatile world trade situation, is this a position that the UK really wants to be in?

If delegates at this year’s NFU Conference leave with more clarity on these questions, will it be sufficient to raise sectoral confidence, throughout the UK’s food supply chain? Let us hope so.