

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 15th MARCH

Red Tractor standards on pesticides failing farmers, consumers and the environment

A new report launched today reveals that Red Tractor – the UK’s largest food standards label – is lagging behind on tackling pesticides, undermining claims that its logo is a marker of stronger environmental protection.

Sub Standard – published by the Nature Friendly Farming Network with the support of Pesticide Action Network UK and RSPB – highlights a range of improvements that Red Tractor urgently needs to make, or risk finding itself irrelevant as the UK Government, major supermarkets and consumers increasingly focus their attention on pesticide reduction.

Red Tractor certifies around 50,000 farmers across the UK and describes its standards as covering ‘animal welfare, food safety, traceability and environmental protection’(1). Consumers will be familiar with its logo which appears on a wide range of UK produce including meat, dairy and vegetables.

Martin Lines, co-author of the report, farmer and Chair of the Nature Friendly Farming Network, said:

“Our interviews with Red Tractor certified farmers have revealed that the standards are barely encouraging – let alone supporting – farmers to reduce their pesticide use. There are many UK farmers working hard to switch to using non-chemical alternatives and it’s time Red Tractor, as our largest farm and food assurance scheme, becomes a key player in driving the transition to more sustainable farming systems. Farmers want – and need – their support to work with nature instead of against it.”

The report highlights some key deficiencies within Red Tractor’s approach to pesticides, including the lack of any targets to reduce use. There are a number of techniques widely known to lessen the need for pesticides but, unlike some other farming standards (2), Red Tractor does not require its certified farmers to adopt them. These include making use of beneficial insects to control pests, selecting pest and disease resistant crop varieties, rotating crops regularly and applying less harmful biopesticides.

Josie Cohen, Head of Policy and Campaigns at PAN UK, added:

“If we’re to have any hope of solving the biodiversity crisis then we must move away from our dependence on pesticides. But Red Tractor standards continue to prioritise the use of chemicals, without placing limits on how much or where they can be used. Unlike many UK supermarkets, Red Tractor allows its farmers to use any legal pesticide product, regardless of concerns over impacts to human health or the environment.”

Interviews and surveys conducted by the report authors with three of the UK’s largest supermarkets (3) also revealed a major gap between how Red Tractor is viewed by consumers and retailers. Supermarkets explained that they see Red Tractor as a baseline

standard which does not go beyond confirming that farmers are sticking to national pesticide laws and regulations. In contrast, the common public perception is that Red Tractor certified farmers operate under stricter obligations than their non-certified counterparts.

Steph Morren, Senior Policy Officer at RSPB, said:

“Confirming that farmers are abiding by the law should be a role for Government, rather than a private company like Red Tractor. People understandably expect standards to go beyond the law to offer a higher level of environmental protection – for wildlife and for society. We urge Red Tractor to strengthen its approach to pesticides so that farmers feel supported to reduce their use, and retailers and their customers can rest assured that a Red Tractor logo means that food has been grown more sustainably.”

The authors are keen to work with Red Tractor to implement the detailed set of recommendations included in the report. Their headline recommendations for Red Tractor include:

- Establish and monitor targets to reduce the total amount of pesticides used by Red Tractor certified farmers.
- Prohibit the use of the most harmful pesticides and require farmers to select non-chemical alternatives when available.
- Adapt the requirements of its standard to include a specific focus on pesticide use and hazard reduction, and place more emphasis on preventative and non-chemical methods for managing pests, diseases and weeds.
- Introduce measures designed to support farmers to make continuous improvements on reducing pesticide use and adopting non-chemical approaches.

-ENDS-

For media enquiries, please contact:

Alena Walker, Nature Friendly Farming Network, alena.walker@nffn.org.uk, +44 (0)7553790628
Josie Cohen, Pesticide Action Network UK, josie@pan-uk.org, +44 (0)7956 250 260

Notes to Editors:

- (1) Red Tractor website, About Us page, <https://redtractor.org.uk/about-red-tractor/>
- (2) The report compares Red Tractor standards with other existing standards, primarily the Integrated Production (IP) standard and guidelines of the International Organisation of Biological Control (IOBC) https://www.iobc-wprs.org/ip_integrated_production/index.html
- (3) Given their business relationships with Red Tractor, the three supermarkets that participated in the project were promised anonymity so have not been named. All three supermarkets are major players in the UK grocery market with a combined total number of stores that exceeds 7,000.
- (4) “*Sub Standard: How Red Tractor standards are failing to drive pesticide reduction*” is co-authored by the Nature Friendly Farming Network (<https://www.nffn.org.uk/>), PAN UK (<https://www.pan-uk.org/>) and RSPB (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/>)
- (5) The full report is available upon request.