



WWF BASKET METRIC EXPLAINER:

ROBUST SCHEMES FOR BIODIVERSITY AND SOIL HEALTH

**(FORMERLY 'ROBUST
ENVIRONMENTAL SCHEMES')**

NOVEMBER 2023

CONTEXT: THE AGRICULTURAL PILLAR OF THE WWF BASKET

Food production is dependent on healthy ecosystems and a relatively stable climate.

At a farm landscape level, healthier ecosystems benefit farmers as they have the potential to deliver higher yields, for example by boosting soil health, helping water retention and supporting higher pollinator numbers.

However, at present, our agricultural system – including a wide range of conventional farming practices – is fuelling the climate crisis and driving nature loss, compromising the healthy ecosystems that food production itself relies upon.

The agricultural pillar of the [WWF Basket](#) sets a series of outcomes and measures to address these impacts and support the recovery of vital ecosystems. Collectively, these are aimed at curbing the environmental impacts of agricultural production, and ensuring vital ecosystem services - like healthy soils and freshwater systems - are adequately protected, and even enhanced.

The 2030 outcomes for UK retailers set out within the agricultural pillar of the WWF Basket are to ensure:

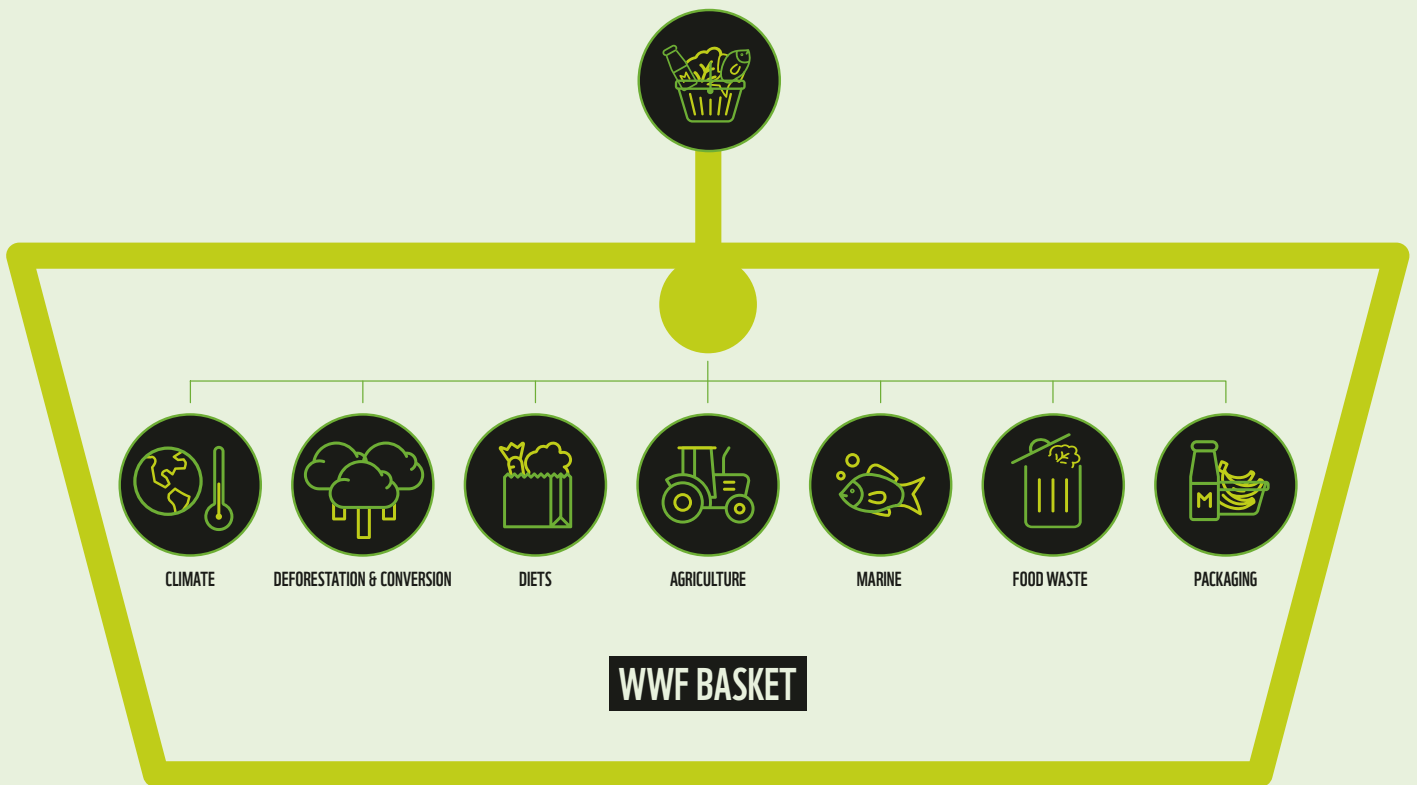
- at least 50% of whole produce and grains certified or covered by a robust environmental scheme;
- 100% of meat, dairy and eggs, including as ingredients, are sourced to 'Better' standard, as set out in the Eating Better Sourcing Better framework;
- At least 50% of fresh food comes from areas with sustainable water management, in line with Courtauld 2030 commitments;
- Agricultural emissions are lowered in line with 1.5 degrees, based on Science Based Targets.

The 'Robust Environmental Schemes' outcome was designed to improve on-farm biodiversity and soil health for fresh produce and grains, given that water, climate and issues like animal welfare and antimicrobial resistance are covered by the other agriculture pillar outcomes. Biodiversity and soil health are difficult to measure at scale, so a proxy metric that built on existing farm-scale interaction was chosen.

To ensure the descriptor accurately reflects the scope of what is being assessed - WWF will now refer to this outcome as "robust schemes for biodiversity and soil health". The next iteration of the WWF Basket Outcomes and Measures document (expected 2024) will be updated to reflect this change.

While each individual outcome within the agricultural pillar is vitally important, it is the collective impact of meeting each of the outcomes and measures across not just agriculture, but every pillar of the WWF Basket, that will drive the transformational change that is required to halve the environmental impact of UK baskets by 2030 – the overarching goal of the WWF Basket.

THE SEVEN AREAS OF THE WWF BASKET



WHY DO SOIL HEALTH AND BIODIVERSITY MATTER?

Without healthy soils and biodiversity, our food system would cease to function, hence these areas form a focus for the agricultural pillar of the WWF Basket.

Soil is more than just a substrate. It is the combination of geology, living and decaying organisms and environmental processes creating a physically structured ecosystem. Healthy soils are one of the fundamentals of food production; soil sustains plant growth, while also acting as a repository for moisture, facilitating the nutrient cycle and sequestering carbon, alongside other ecosystem services. Ensuring UK soil is in good health is essential to safeguard the resilience of our agricultural sector.

Apart from its intrinsic value and enriching our wellbeing, biodiversity also underpins productivity: abundant, balanced populations of diverse species, from plants and fungi to insects to birds, reptiles and mammals, fulfil niches within the environment, from digesting waste products, to pollination, to predation; this supports ecosystem health, including driving the nutrient cycle. Biodiversity is therefore key in ensuring our landscapes continue to be productive.

DEFINING THE SCOPE FOR ROBUST SCHEMES FOR BIODIVERSITY AND SOIL HEALTH (FORMERLY “ROBUST ENVIRONMENTAL SCHEMES”)

As robust schemes for biodiversity and soil health represents a new area for measurement in this way, WWF commissioned agricultural and sustainability consultancy Promar International to set a clear definition and scope for this metric, to enable retailer reporting. Details are set out below.

In terms of defining ‘robust’:

- A ‘robust’ scheme for soil and biodiversity health is defined, for the purposes of this metric, as one that demonstrably improves outcomes whilst maintaining an ability to function in the face of changing conditions.
- To achieve this, it must be well-designed, effectively implemented, and meet the environmental priorities of its stakeholders. It should also be able to withstand changes in economic conditions, policy environments, and other factors that could affect its success (see also [ISEAL](#)).

Wider environmental outcomes, for example water quality and carbon emissions reductions, are measured through other WWF Basket metrics within the agricultural pillar.

SETTING THE STANDARD FOR ROBUST SCHEMES FOR BIODIVERSITY AND SOIL HEALTH

WWF commissioned Promar International to set out a framework to assess UK certification schemes for fresh produce and grains to in terms of benefits to biodiversity and soil health, and to use this framework to determine which schemes and scheme combinations meet a specified threshold for robust.

This is intended to act as a reporting mechanism to indicate whether a given scheme (or combination of schemes) is likely to be sufficiently ambitious to support the wider ambition of the WWF Basket to halve the environmental impact of UK shopping baskets.

It is important to note that, when it comes to quantitatively relating action to impact in many aspects of soil health and biodiversity, the science is either lacking altogether, or there is only an emerging consensus (e.g. around cover crops), which does not yet apply to all situations because of the degree of variability in both action and context.

Promar assessed existing certification schemes by analysing impacts on / benefits to:

- Habitats
- Soils
- Ecosystem vulnerabilities
- Direct species impacts

Certification schemes were given a score across each area of assessment. Cumulative scores were then used to determine whether specific certifications met the requirements to be regarded as robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity.



WHERE DO EXISTING CERTIFICATIONS STAND?

As of 2023, for fresh produce and grains, the list of robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity, or scheme combinations that meet the threshold, is relatively narrow.

This reflects the fact that the great majority of farm assurance schemes are primarily focused on food safety and traceability, or a specific farming system, rather than being designed as schemes that focus specifically on biodiversity and soil health – albeit often covering environment through specified areas of regulatory compliance.

In view of that, the metric seeks to enable the combination of the basic assurance schemes with public agri-environmental payment scheme options.



Within the UK fresh produce and grain sectors, the following farm assurance schemes, and combinations of schemes – through Promar’s assessment – have been determined to be robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity for 2022/23:

- Organic production standards, regardless of the control body.
- LEAF Marque, when combined with 5% of the farmed area enrolled in a qualifying habitat scheme.

We recognise that a number of UK retailers are not yet capturing the data required to report on aggregate metrics (e.g. LEAF Marque plus 5% of the farmed area enrolled in a qualifying habitat scheme). This means that reporting for 2023 may not capture the full picture of progress within this metric.

Given that the full sweep of environmental benefits derived from existing environmental certification schemes may not be captured in this assessment, the determination of a ‘robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity’ should not be taken as a proxy for a holistic assessment of all of the environmental benefits conferred by any specific scheme. The wider environmental benefits conferred by existing certification schemes are expected to be captured, explicitly or implicitly, through the other outcomes and measures within the WWF Basket agricultural pillar.

As existing certification schemes evolve, and as new schemes emerge, it is expected that a growing number of schemes will take steps that will mean that they eventually meet the criteria set out for robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity, making it easier for retailers to report on this metric in future years (see also [Deconinck & Hobeika, 2023](#)).

Adopting robust schemes for biodiversity and soil health for fresh produce and grains is a one step towards a more sustainable, resilient food system. However, in the immediate term, it is vital to ensure that farmers and growers are adequately supported to deliver this shift to more sustainable approaches, both through government incentives and by ensuring associated costs do not fall disproportionately on primary producers, while potential rewards are cascaded to those delivering the changes (see [WWF Land of Plenty](#)).

EXPANSION TO OVERSEAS SUPPLY CHAINS

Focusing on the percentage of UK fresh produce and grains derived from producers who operate according to robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity may increase a risk of offshoring to supply chains overseas. WWF is therefore working with WWF network offices and other relevant organisations in key UK supplying countries to develop means to extend our assessment of robust schemes for soil and biodiversity health to international supply chains, and we hope to set this out for data collection from 2024.



THE FUTURE OF THE WWF BASKET METRIC FOR ROBUST SCHEMES FOR BIODIVERSITY AND SOIL HEALTH

WWF aims to review environmental certification schemes at least every two years, to ensure the list of robust schemes for soil and biodiversity health, and possible combinations to meet the threshold, remains up to date, and that existing standards that are deemed robust are maintained or strengthened over time.

WWF has committed to a dialogue with retailers and other stakeholders on robust schemes for biodiversity and soil health and we welcome feedback from stakeholders not previously engaged.

OTHER RESOURCES

Please contact tstuart@wwf.org.uk if you have any questions or would like more information about Promar's methodology and overall analysis of robust schemes for soil health and biodiversity.



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