

UK Can Farm Smarter, Greener

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A new report from researchers at the University of Sheffield has found that a simple adjustment in farming practices could increase crop yields in the UK's peatlands while simultaneously increasing that soil's ability to store the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. The BBC reports:

University of Sheffield researchers are encouraging farmers to increase the water table to 30cm under the surface, rather than the recommended 50cm. [...]

The team of researchers wanted to test the idea that increasing the water table underground would lead to an increase in the absorption of carbon dioxide from the air. In order to do this, they carried out a lab experiment using soil taken from peat agricultural land on the Norfolk Fens (one of the largest UK lowland peatlands used for commercial farming).

British farmers drain peatlands that flood naturally in order to plant crops, but these new research suggests that bumping that water table up just 20cm could both increase plants' biomass while reducing the loss of arable soil.

This looks like very good news for the UK, not just for its potential effect on the country's greenhouse gas emissions, but also for its future food security. More generally it's a reminder that modern agriculture, as massive and industrial as it has become, still has room for improvement. Some of these improvements will come

from genetically modified foods—one of the most important technologies for future sustainable development—but some will come from the simple adoption of better farming practices, as these Sheffield scientists have shown.