

Farming Update prepared for the Devon Churches Rural Forum meeting on 8th February 2021 – with grateful thanks to Andy Jerrard, Colin Smallacombe, David Ursell, Danny Semorad, Joanne Jones and Adrian Brook

Overview

From Danny ...

As we begin another year I am feeling quite positive about agriculture, but it is also sad that so many have to suffer before farming is appreciated. I think the NFU and Minette Batters have done an excellent job in raising the public's awareness and forcing the Government and the supermarkets to support British agriculture. After an initial dip last April beef prices have held up well reaching a high this month. Reaching a 'deal' with the EU was a relief. Whatever happens next they are still our nearest and biggest trading partner. The new Agriculture Bill is starting to show something of the future of farming. We will all have to make changes, but that's what farmers have always done. We hold the key to the country becoming carbon neutral. Although farming businesses are so individual, let's hope everyone will stick together, support the NFU and work for a better future for us all.

Mental Health, Covid, FCN

Colin reports that normally finance would be the main issue reported to the FCN helpline but now over 50% of calls relate to Mental Health. This is a huge proportion so our prayers for this situation please (see also Andy's words about Covid and isolation below).

Andy reports "There are those who presume that Covid 19 has not had too great an impact on farmers - everything carries on as normal seems to be the prevailing thought except it hasn't... not quite. No shows, skittles, pool, few or no 'in person' church services, no, or little shooting or hunting, limited attendance at markets and (possibly the worst) no chance for close-knit communities to say goodbye en-masse to departed friends. At the same time the isolation of 'normal life' has remained. After nearly twelve months there is good reason to be concerned at the adverse impact this may have on some individuals and families. Will the effect of the enforced extra level of isolation be cast aside or will it remain, if so, what then?"

Colin has also now become FCN Co-ordinator for Devon. Previously this was a role he shared with Joanne Jones, who has stepped back from co-ordination, but remains an active volunteer. Colin's contact details, for anyone who needs them are colinsmallacombe.fcn@gmail.com or mobile 07999711950 or please signpost people to the FCN website where the national helpline and email address can be found <https://fcn.org.uk/>

Farm Prices

Andy says "As others will no doubt mention, the off farm prices for most things have been 'good' for several months. However this is not Bonanza Time but more Payback Time as most sectors of agriculture still struggle to build up anything regarding a useful 'capital reserve'. Anyone selling cull pigs of late would disagree with things being 'good'. £10.00 for a cull sow anyone?"

Colin reports "Prices for Beef and Sheep have climbed throughout the last nine months. As the Brexit deal was agreed so far we haven't seen any adverse effects on prices. On the other hand Pig prices have slumped recently."

Brexit and related issues

Joanne says "in general I think the full impact of Brexit will not be known for a while. As seen on TV, there have been issues with exporting sea food & they have also been some delays for meat exports. There have been less imports so the price has held in general for meat and dairy is steady.

The main issue we have found is the availability of medicines over the last 6 months, especially for treating mastitis in dairy cows. Many treatments seem to not being produced or have limited availability, resulting in ineffective treatment & cows having to be culled - think some of this may be due to Brexit, but the situation is not totally clear."

Labour movement and overseas workers will continue to be an issue post Brexit. David says 30 thousand foreign workers will be allowed in for seasonal work.

He also adds, on standards, "UK Organic standards will be acceptable till 2023. If unfair competition is taking place the EU will act. Existing bans e.g. Neonicotinoids will continue as they are already in place, but if not already in place they will be subject to our own rules e.g. Roundup. We have assurance that chlorinated chicken will not be imported along with hormone treated beef."

Changes to the Basic Farm Payment

Colin says we now know the timetable and % drop in the BPS payments but are still waiting for more details of the new schemes. A point picked up by Andy ...

"Planning to farm without the Basic Payment but not knowing the full implications of the Environment Land Management Scheme is difficult and still leaves the feeling that we are governed by those who fail to understand and appreciate that feeding people is a rather useful public good and that it is better done on your own soil (where possible) rather than relying on imports."

David adds more information on the Environmental Land Management (ELMs scheme) ...

“Here are a few thoughts and possible updates on the ELMs [Environmental Land Management]. The basic rates of pay will be on a reducing scale up to 2024. By then they will be delinked from land area. There will be a lump sum available from 2022 for retiring farmers to encourage them to retire! ELM will support farmers for some production but mostly environmental schemes including tree planting, wildlife, clean air and water sustainable farming landscape preservation.

There are at least 3 Tiers. Tier 1 is entry level. Tier 2 is nature recovery and collaboration with neighbours to increase size of recovery and Tier 3 is Landscape recovery i.e. changes of use for forest, peatlands probably also collaborative. There will be a new entrants support scheme, and skills training available. Countryside stewardship will be available till 1/1/24 so worth pursuing. ELMs are generally going to be more complicated.”

Consultations

Andy says “Public consultations are also a big feature of the moment with their far reaching implications. The current Bovine Tuberculosis one will have significant implications in this part of the world as might the recently completed Animal Welfare in Transport consultation. Having endeavoured to complete some of these it is not a task for tired bodies and brains with a considerable time needed to wade through guidance notes as well as the forms themselves, but as many as possible need to participate to ensure that the voice of food producers is given due weight.”

And from Adrian Brook, with some thoughts and information on the current debate surrounding animal sourced foods in diets around the world ...

I have been listening to some of the concerns and discussions of farmers recently regarding the future of farming especially the new carbon tax being introduced in Canada and New Zealand. I wondered how many people are aware of the EAT Lancet Commission and the Great Food Transformation and whether it might be something for the DRCF to be aware of?

The following provide some good background information. There are definitely some moral and ethical issues to be addressed around this.

<https://aleph-2020.blogspot.com/2020/08/ideologies-and-vested-interests.html>

<https://aleph-2020.blogspot.com/2020/10/towards-great-food-transformation.html>