

Farming Today

Tim Bennett

President of the National Farmers' Union of England and Wales



Innovation and improvement characterised agriculture from the outset and are important today. They currently play a major role although legislation is often irrational and driven by emotion, sentiment or fashion rather than scientific principles.

British farming has grappled with devastating problems over the last decade and survivors have endured historically poor returns due to Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis (BSE) since 1996, followed by the huge outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in 2001.

I am very well aware that as the new President of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) the next few years will be crucial for the future of British agriculture and all its dependents including the farmers, farm workers, their families and the whole food chain, including all those who purchase our products.

I have also been recently involved in reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) where throughout the 1990s the NFU has led the initially small pro-reform group of European Union (EU) farmers. Margaret Beckett referred to the implications of CAP reform achieved last year as "ground breaking". We have still not reached those who call for further radical reform. Sure, there are some areas yet to be reformed (sugar and dairy for example) but breaking the link between production and subsidy is massively important, not least for "Land Use and Management", our subject today. I sometimes wonder whether some people really do not want the CAP reformed, so fond of it are they as a whipping boy for the ills of the world!

It was the third birthday last week for the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). A troubled

and sometimes tiresome young Department to start with! But it is showing signs of growing up, and it cannot be accused of suffering from too limited a portfolio, ranging from Kyoto to biodiversity, from farming, food and fisheries to bathing beaches! Although there are some fine words in the Department's policy documents, it still has a way to go in appreciating how agriculture can help deliver the sustainability and environmental objectives. Farmers will need guidance, support and understanding – not the dead hand of inappropriate regulation.

Rural delivery is an important part of Defra's objective. Chris Haskins has analysed the problems correctly, separated policy from delivery, trusted the deliverers more than in the past and thrown down a gauntlet to Government. There is a culture in successive governments of centralising power and resources, despite rhetoric to the contrary. The Government's response to Chris Haskins report is due about now, so we will soon know if they are going to shrug off the centrist culture, pick up the gauntlet, and reform and modernise rural delivery by action and not just words.

The new Integrated Agency will have a very important role. It is Chris's view that "compulsory takeovers are more effective than mergers". But the Agency must have balance, merging activities of the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service with Wildlife Conservation. It might also be given some of the socio-economic elements of the English Rural Development Programme – another reason why a "Super English Nature" would not be an appropriate vehicle for this task.

A key test for the Haskins reforms will be whether the new funding streams

work efficiently. The rural aspects of Regional Development Agencies have performed patchily. If they are to become responsible for planning regional delivery, then they must be more consistently attuned to rural objectives, and the relationship with counties will be vital. Better delivery of funding and better value for the taxpayer must be achieved while also ensuring a coherent approach to economic development regionally.

The NFU has been reviewing its environmental policy against a background of industrial difficulties, European reform, and structural changes in government and the delivery system. Repeated surveys show that the public value farming principally for the care and maintenance of the countryside, and believe that it is in good heart. This traditional link is coming under great pressure as lesser numbers of farmers and workers respond to evolving market needs, thus forcing change in farming practice.

The range of agriculture's environmental priorities is also growing in breadth and complexity, including greenhouse gases, water quality and quantity, soil protection, biodiversity, historic heritage, public access and waste management. Environmental issues are now "centre field" to an extent unthinkable 30 years ago.

What farmers do with their land is central to Government's vision for rural areas but the work they do is undervalued and unrecognised, for example there was been no change in hedgerow length during the 1990s (450,000kms); there were more lowland ponds (up by 12,200 to 230,900); the decline in biodiversity has been halted or reversed (farmland bird numbers are now stable and otters are now found in many lowland

rivers); and 95% of English waters are of good or fair biological quality (89% in 1990).

The FMD crisis demonstrated strong links between farming and recreation, valued at £9 billion annually by the Countryside Agency. About 50% of countryside visits generate no income, so providers need better rewards. Nearly 70% of 188,000 kms of Rights of Way are in satisfactory condition. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will add a million additional hectares of land, with the SE and NW regions open to the public from 19 September 2004. This may threaten the livelihoods of some farmers who must be protected and helped, but provide opportunities for others.

Our key messages are:

The NFU is committed to leading a modern, competitive, environmentally sensitive and forward-looking farming industry

Farmers currently demonstrate their commitment to environmental protection and improvement

Challenges lie ahead for agriculture that will require a step change in environmental performance as new and revised standards come into force

We wish to work with partners to achieve an environmentally responsible industry that has their confidence and is assured of its viability

Opportunities over the horizon for testing these messages include:

Implementation of CAP cross-compliance - January 2005

Introduction of the new Environmental Stewardship Scheme – early 2005.

Implementation of new agricultural waste regulations – mid 2005

Implementation of IPPC for pig and poultry units above certain size thresholds – 2007 for existing units

Public Service Agreement target for bringing 95% of all nationally important wildlife sites into favourable condition by 2010

Achieve good ecological status for most surface and ground waters by 2015

Public Service Agreement target reversing the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020

Reduced availability of tools with perceived high levels of environmental impact, such as pesticides

Our principles for better environmental policy and regulation are:

evidence-based policy making

a robust science base

proportionate and targeted regulation

a whole farm context

partnerships

early engagement

foster good practice

reward environmental enhancement

assure viable farm businesses

Environmental concern and action should be based on the precautionary approach. Where there are gaps in scientific knowledge we should act on the information available and adjust regulation in line with improvements in the knowledge base. Policy-making must be evidence-based on scientifically robust data with analysis of the costs and benefits for the options available.

Farmers are recovering from industrial disaster and depression. They need to prepare for and implement reform of the support system and be vigilant for further changes in conditions arising from global trade rules and practice. They must adjust to reformed rural delivery arrangements and meet new environmental regulatory requirements. This has to be delivered while providing what the customer and the public want and develop businesses that are profitable and sustainable in the longer term! These are major challenges and we will need the expert advice of scientists, the support of politicians and the machinery of state, if we are to respond to this ever-widening, somewhat daunting, and sometimes conflicting, agenda.

In discussion the following points were made:

Farmers are fewer but are more efficient and multiskilled. Candidates for entry to the EU in 2007 can help overcome UK labour shortages for harvesting short lived high value crops at short notice. Intensive longer term labour for the milking parlour can also be solved by outsourcing. Training and re-skilling are very poor. Some of the best farm managers never went near an agricultural college.

The US leads production of non-food pharmaceuticals. As techniques are not well understood in the UK, this work is likely to migrate overseas. Whereas the US farming culture is innovative and dynamic, the UK is dominated by regulation. For example the US already has five plants in Kansas for production of biofuels.

What is the science agenda doing to make UK agriculture more competitive? Greater output per hectare is entwined with environmental, aesthetic and cosmetic concerns. The industry is now dominated by consumer power. Farmers are responding to supermarkets that reflect public pressure. Science has lost its way in agriculture with the power and influence of scientists decreasing relative to other professions.

Water quality issues are reflected in CAP changes, especially in the dairy industry and in recognition of the need for water resources uncontaminated by farm wastes. In the USA 30% of irrigation water is wasted and this represents a R&D opportunity. Farming consumes 70% of the world's fresh water and only 5% is drunk.

The UK leads Europe in outdoor pigs and treats farm animals with respect so that UK pork now sells at a premium. Food quality issues predominate in supermarkets. The supply chain model driven by the CAP through farm subsidies is redundant. Farmers respond to customer needs directly. Supermarkets may develop into boutiques selling quality produce from local identified sources. Milk mountains will become a thing of the past. Labelling is important for consumer trust. The size of holdings varies from large in the east to small in the west. This has not impacted negatively on biodiversity as 88% of bird species noted by Rachel Carson as threatened with extinction are now out of danger.