

Chairs Update October 2008

It's been a rather choppy ride for lowland farmers over the past few weeks, and my farm manager has like his colleagues gone from depression to contentment. He is now all planted up and has harvested higher yields albeit the quality is down. But as I often remind him he is on boys land in the Vale. My contacts in the uplands suggest effects of the rain have been more serious with a much reduced winter fodder supply.

Whilst the land management sector is only a small part of the rural economy it does still I think set the rural mood, as conversations in shops and pubs are about the weather and what is going on in the fields. Other sectors will now be facing the credit crunch and the downturn, however the fall in oil price will help, and hopefully this will knock on to other energy costs. Maybe the cost of travel will bring increased trade to our local shops and extra tourists next year.

The world crisis has brought the concept of Food Security to the fore and Defra have a consultation out on how they might approach this in the future. The re-organisation of Defra for a third time in eighteen months does not engender the confidence of continuity, but the removal of the international climate change role might help bring them back into a UK rural focus. It will be up to the farming lobby to push forward into the policy gap and re-balance the "F" for Food in Defra.

You may have seen press reports about an NFU campaign on Why Science Matters for Farming. As a director of a Horticultural Technology Business in the region (STC Cawood) we are equally concerned about the withdrawal of Government funding from our sector. We are losing another centre at Kirton in Lincolnshire in the spring. Horticulture is some 20% of the "agricultural" output in the UK and the need to adapt our businesses to the challenges of extra production, and the adaptation to the new pests and diseases arriving already due to climate change are immense. Such challenges cannot be met without Government commitment.

I have also been closely involved with another lunacy of regulators going on at the moment. This is a review of pesticide usage, called 91/414 in Brussels speak. Basically the whole world works on "risk" as assessed by leading scientific experts and determined in the place of use. The EU now want to work on intrinsic hazard when considering registration of pesticides, regardless of place or method of use. A report by our York based Government PSD scientists says this system will remove most of the pesticides growers need to use and basically destroy horticultural production in the UK as well as damage farming. Of course the fruit and vegetables will be imported from countries where these pesticides are registered using the world agreed "risk" basis. The residues that are supposed to concern the consumer will therefore still occur!! It does not seem sensible in a world with concerns of Food Security to export our industry and not achieve any change in food quality.

I will return to other rural affairs next month and in the interest of balance see the editorial I have written for the October edition of Rural Matters.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon Wang', written in a cursive style.