

Chairman's update: February 2008

I have now been in chair for eleven months. Having attended lots of meetings at regional and national level in the Rural Affairs section of the Rural Agenda I am struck by the lack of the economic input; not least from food and other land based production sectors to balance the agendas. Yes, actual food production output measures very low in GVA, but the management of the landscape and the natural environment is also an output. In other words the totality of the rural economy and its environment should be joined up in partnership, and in my view you cannot separate social from economy from environment, (the three pillars of sustainability).

Defra have just published an action plan for an ecosystems approach to the Natural Environment. This refers to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment by the United Nations. It gives four basic properties of ecosystems (briefly).

Provisioning the products, fresh water, food, fibres, fuel..

Regulating the benefits of regulating air, water quality, climate, erosion, flood, pests.

Cultural, spiritual enrichment, recreation, aesthetic enjoyment.

Supporting services to support the system photosynthesis, nutrient and water cycling and primary production.

When you read about the partners to mainstream this approach they are Natural England, The Environment Agency and The Forestry Commission. All powerful Non Dept Public Bodies but no mention of food/fuel/fibre or primary production.

Next the Cabinet Office Sub National Review Guidance, Creating Strong and Prosperous Communities has a list of partners for LSP to liaise with for target setting. This list of some 27 partners has 7 in the Regulating or Cultural sections of the basic ecosystem properties but none in the Provisioning or Supporting sections.

Defra are majoring on Climate Change and the Environment and my own view is that the production /land economic management agenda is now lower down the department's outputs. The Minister for Agriculture is in the House of Lords which is a monitor of Government policies, not the originator and accountable owner of policy. Indeed one could be cynical and say the land management interest of this House has been severely curtailed in its recent reorganization.

There are lots of Non Government Organisations (NGO) which act as powerful lobbies in policy and strategy outcomes, but as powerful as these bodies including those representing land managers are, they do not have the clout and resources of the NGDP's.

Is it time there was a Foods /Fuel /Fibre Production Agency created to act as the focus for these activities of our rural areas? A Non Dept Public Body to be able to balance

the outcomes of the policy and strategy meetings, which are now the basis of the very welcome devolved structures of Government.