

Thoughts from a Northern Mart November 2008

Despite the rain, and especially on the few sunny days, this year the trees and bushes have provided the most fantastic display of autumn colour. Here in the North it has been truly amazing. The bountiful supplies of apples has led to a huge number of apple pies and apples products being put into storage for use later on in the year. One fruit not in evidence especially around my area is the sloe. This will lead to a downturn in the production of Sloe Gin, the consequences of which could be far reaching in the rural areas, in years to come.

While good progress has been made with sowing in most places, there are still some areas to be completed. This sowing will probably not get done because of the mauling the land got in the wet conditions of harvest and the following wet weather. The wet weather and poor seed beds are causing cereal germination problems and where growth has started, this is being hampered by the slugs hollowing the grain or grazing on the growing plants. One farmer said to me at the mart one day "why is it that slugs never seem to suffer from the wet or drought conditions?" In his words they seem to be indestructible. All this could lead to smaller crops next harvest

Farmers who grow potatoes are struggling to harvest the 2008 crop and are having problems meeting the standards imposed by the supermarket, crisp and frozen chip industries. They, of course, are cutting the price on offer to the farmer. It is hoped that the recent change in law on vegetable specification will allow some of the more nobly and mis-shapen products onto our plates and cut down on the high levels of waste. The animal feed wheat market is over supplied and this will keep the spot wheat market depressed for some time to come with a substantial carry-over being forecast into the 2009 harvest of animal feed grade wheat.

The effect of the recession is being felt by the farming industry like all the rest of commerce and the public. With farming borrowing being at the highest level ever at £11.1 billion, the move by one of the major banks in raising their cost of borrowing to their farming customers by just writing a letter and no discussion with the farmer, left a sour taste in the mouths of many of their customers.

The prices for prime stock have held up very well with some dead weight companies trying to pull the market price back, especially pig meat. The number of cows coming through the market is quite high, particularly the young suckler cows. Generally, the number of suckler cows looks to be declining, and this will have an effect on the beef market over the next few years. This is a consequence of the lack support for the beef industry leading to low returns. Without that support, the economics of beef production are very vulnerable. If it continues it will affect the look of the hill country for many years to come. And if the decline of cows on the hill continues, the whole shape and structure of the countryside will change, especially when coupled with the falling number of hill sheep.

Yorkshire Farm Crisis Network are holding a silent auction, details of which can be found by following the links on the national FCN web site; www.fcn.org.uk. The list includes many fantastic lots including Cottage to rent in North Perthshire, 10 12oz sirloin steaks, home produced lamb, Fishing and Shooting etc. Deadline for bids is 10th December and all proceeds of the sale will go to FCN .

Last year a group of local clergy and CRC rural project organised a carol service at Thirsk Mart on the Saturday before Christmas which was an outstanding success. This year the event will be repeated on the 20th of December at 2pm, with a Salvation Army Band, carols, and lessons and as guest speaker The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu. It will be a great start to the festive season for the farmers of the area. Archbishop Sentamu, who spoke recently at the East riding NFU dinner, is a great supporter of UK farming.

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