

Thoughts from a Northern Mart February 2010

The cold weather continues and although the snow has gone off the low ground, returning for only a few hours, it is still hanging around on the high ground. Some of the old boys say that it will take another big fall to shift the lingering snow! The legacy of the damage to the roads by the frost is evident with some major potholes which are damaging vehicles. The Councils are trying to get round to the problem roads but repairs will take a long time and a lot of money.

The problems in the dairy sector continue with a regular exodus from the industry. A farmer summed things up for me the other day when he said that it takes 1000 days from conception to that cow giving birth and starting milk production which is sold at around 21p a litre. Whereas the supermarket can have that milk in their hands for less than a 1000 minutes before it is sold for 80+ pence a litre; a somewhat skewed apportionment of costs and profit. Many hardened and cynical farmers commented to me that the BBC Country File report on dairy farming was excellent and gave a very good picture of the industry's plight. On the subject of TV, Jimmy's Global Harvest programmes shown on BBC 2 were well worth. Look out for the repeats. They showed the size and complexities global farming, and how consumer demand drives the production of food which nowadays is a global commodity and is traded as such on the stock markets of the world! This is a far cry from the image of the local family farm supplying the immediate area. Whilst on the subject of media stars, the British pig industry is hoping for surge in demand on the back of the news that Jamie Oliver is joining up with Cranswick, the specialist pig meat and sausage production company.

The long awaited details of the new Upland Entry Level Scheme to replace the Hill Farm Allowance have been announced by DEFRA with a deadline of the 1st May for the first applicants for agreements to begin by the 1st of July. The compulsory requirements include avoiding over and under grazing, maintaining a minimum stocking level, maintaining wetlands and avoiding ploughing, cultivation or application of fertilizers. Compulsory requirements below the moorland line include repairing dry stone walls and hedges in traditional style and retaining existing native scrub.

New options for Uplands ELS include hedgerow restoration, sheep fencing around small woods, maintaining weatherproof traditional farm buildings in remote locations and managing enclosed rough grazing for birds.

The cynical farmer may well say they can't see any mention of food production! But the reward is being given for maintaining the environment. This scheme will result in a lot work for the farmers and advisors, with some support for some farmers in the harsh upland areas, but sadly not as much as previously.

I am reassured that despite all these changes, the Great British Farmer will continue to be custodians of the countryside they have shaped over the past countless years and will maintain it in the manner and style we have grown to like.

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