

Thoughts from a Northern Mart November 2007

Indian Summer continues

At the time of writing these thoughts, the weather is still spectacular and the colours of the leaves are amazing. The grass growth has finally slowed down, and in the higher ground has stopped, leading to more and more expensive supplementary feeding of stock. One downside of this superb weather is that if cattle are housed, the warm days and cold nights can lead to conditions of high humidity in the housing which can trigger respiratory diseases.

Foot & Mouth/ Blue Tongue

The ongoing Blue Tongue restrictions, affecting markets and farmers in East and South Yorkshire, York and Selby districts, continue to disrupt marketing and movements. Cattle on Summer grazing (which is coming to an end) in a Blue Tongue zone cannot be moved to the farms where they are to be wintered which are outside the zone, and so welfare issues may arise. The trade in store cattle is also a problem because cattle can move into the Blue Tongue zone but not out of it – unless to slaughter.

Finance

With very depressed prices for most sections of the sheep trade, the plight of the hill farmers is still desperate despite a slight improvement in the trade at the second special mule gimmers sale at Hawes, at which lambs were about £9 a head up on the earlier sale, so only about £12 a head down on last year. The pig industry is in a very desperate situation: the farmers who have been unable to secure forward cover from their feed are in an unsustainable situation, with the price of many rations up by 75%. They are trying to sell breeding stock on the meat market which has led to a collapse in the cull sow trade. Where a price can be obtained, this can be as low as 2p per kilo live weight, depressing the non-contract pig prices which will in turn affect the contract prices.

One farmer who normally feeds a large number of broiler chickens told me last week that the supermarket supplier to whom he normally contracted would not increase the end price; consequently he told them that he would not produce for them and has sold the grain he bought and made more money than if he had used it to feed the chickens.

The milk price continues to improve although the rising cost of food is reducing the increase in profits to a smaller amount than was hoped for. The biggest effect on all farmers is the increase in fuel prices with road derv on sale in the North Yorkshire area up to 109 pence per litre. In areas where there is no alternative to using cars as public transport does not exist and a 4x4 is a necessity rather than a luxury, the tax element on fuel is seen as very unjust. Calls for a release of SFP in December seem to have fallen on deaf ears, with most advisors expecting it not to be paid out until March. It would be very welcome if these advisors were proved wrong! Many farmers around the marts still report that 2005-2006 claims are still to be completed. All this increases pressure on the farming and rural community.

Shows

Once again the Yorkshire Agricultural Society had a very successful event, despite not having livestock at their Countryside Live event, and helped to keep the countryside and the urban population connected. Across the Northern marts the focus is turning to Christmas livestock shows, with animals getting cuts and blow-dries ready for this important event, which will show off farming to its best advantage and help to keep farmers' spirits up.

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