

# Oxford Farming Conference Emerging Leaders

## Hopes and Fears of Progressive Farmers

*An Oxford Farming Conference report*

### Background

In November 2017, 19 progressive farmers met in Oxfordshire to discuss agricultural policy issues in the run-up to Brexit. 14 of the farmers attending had been selected from those who had applied to join the OFC 2018 Emerging Leaders programme. The remaining five farmers attended the conference in Jan 2017 on the pilot Emerging Leaders programme.

To qualify for the programme, all Emerging Leaders:

- Must be aged between 30 and 45 years old
- Must be actively farming in the UK
- Must be able and willing to attend the full conference
- Should not have attended the conference previously.

Among qualities specifically targeted during the selection process were demonstration of a clear progressive outlook within the farm business, leadership potential, and an enthusiasm to resonate views on agricultural policy and practice to a wide farming audience.

The aim of the Emerging Leaders programme is to give a voice, through the Oxford Farming Conference, to forward-thinking UK farmers. They act as a barometer for the OFC on the current farming landscape and a sounding board for how future changes will affect prospects for progressive farming businesses.

### The purpose of the policy discussion

The aim of the policy discussion was to:

- Establish the Emerging Leaders' hopes and fears for a post-Brexit UK Agriculture
- Establish the key areas where change will occur
- Explore what's required to help farm businesses manage these changes.

The discussion focused on five key areas, which reflect those explored at the fringe event of the 2017 OFC:

- **Policy** – direct intervention by government, especially on the environment, but also regulation
- **Trade** – how the commodities markets and exports/imports affect them and particular sectors perceived to be at risk/an opportunity
- **Food** – particularly the potential to add value and highlight quality product and provenance, locality, seasonality
- **Innovation** – the research priorities and how these are introduced on farm, barriers to uptake, new technologies where a knowledge gap exists
- **People** – access to manual (unskilled) labour, training and skills, also the effect of change on rural communities

The discussion was preceded by a brief presentation from Mark Filley, Team Leader, Farming Productivity in Defra's Future Farming and Land Use Directorate, and also one from Gail Soutar, Chief EU Exit and International Trade Adviser with the NFU.

## Key findings

### Policy

There is a real fear that the new British Agricultural Policy (BAP) is being developed by non-agriculturalists.

- The worry is that NGOs with little practical knowledge of farming, will have as much influence on how policy is implemented as the farmers who have to shape their businesses around it.
- There is acute concern about any policy implementation built around an objective of a “Green Brexit” – there is real scope for “impracticalities” here.
- There is also concern that the BAP will be a “one size fits all” solution and will not account for the diversity of farming businesses.
- There must be a long-term view on farm policy.

Specific examples were raised where there is a concern that Defra will follow policy lines perceived to be popular, but with no scientific basis or pragmatism:

- Eradication of bovine TB.
- Further restrictions on neonicotinoid seed dressings.
- Removal of glyphosate.
- Too much emphasis on “farming flowers”.
- Planning regulations around farm diversifications.
- New technologies, particularly in plant breeding.
- The treatment of large farming units – “big doesn’t mean bad”.
- Plant health regulation.

Generally in this area there were more fears about future changes than there were hopes, and the fears were most acute.

- Uncertainty is hampering progress – you can’t invest with confidence when the future direction of the industry around you is so unclear.
- A change of government is seen as a huge potential threat because it would present yet another change of direction.

### Trade and Food

There is great pride and confidence in the high standards of animal welfare and crop husbandry upheld on UK farms.

- The UK has high standards of farm assurance that put us in a strong trading position.
- There’s a feeling that these standards are recognised and reasonably well understood at a government level to the extent that standards wouldn’t be compromised to broker a trade deal (eg allowing imports of chlorinated chicken or hormone-treated beef).

However, there’s a fear these high standards could be used to force the industry to take steps that aren’t in its best interests.

- Following European standards was seen as a potential threat – UK farms could be “hamstrung” by having to follow EU standards and this could become a bargaining tool in trade negotiations.
- The beef and lamb sectors in particular are seen as vulnerable to poor trade deals.
- There may be an impact on food processors of specific trade/tariff changes that will have a knock-on impact on farms – the danger here is that farmers won’t be aware the impact even exists until it starts to bite.

The perceived disconnect between the public and farming and lack of understanding of where food comes from could result in damaging food and trade decisions.

- There’s an education job to be done, which is as much down to individual farmers (eg going into local schools) as it is for the industry to promote itself better.

Generally in these areas the fears are at least balanced or even outweighed by the hopes.

## **Innovation**

If research is being done into future technologies, the impact is not being felt on farm.

- There's a perception this is down to poor extension services or an inadequate approach to knowledge exchange.
- "Technology is great, but what's the commercial return?"
- There's also a fear we're losing our scientists and researchers because there's an overall environment that lacks encouragement for innovation.
- There's a perceived lack of "continuity and connection" – even where something is trialled, there's no follow-up or progression once those trials end – "something runs for 3 years and then it's dropped".

Generally there were few unprompted views in this area, compared with others.

## **People**

Lack of access to non-UK labour is perceived as a real threat to ALL UK farms.

- Even those not employing non-UK labour will be affected indirectly by any restrictions imposed.
- The threat and potential damage to farming from ill thought-through policy decisions are underestimated at a government level.
- As above, there may be an impact on food processors which will have a knock-on impact on farms.

High employment standards and a decent wage should be encouraged throughout farming – these standards shouldn't be compromised.

Generally it was felt there's no upside for farming in tightening immigration control and people movement. However, possible positive outcomes are:

- It may bring about better levels of skills training in the industry (out of necessity)
- It may prompt programmes to reskill the unemployed into the land-based economy

## **What will change?**

There's an acceptance that the current level of farm subsidy will reduce significantly, but that's more of an opportunity than a threat.

- Many of the farm businesses represented do not currently receive farm subsidy.
- Reduction in the Basic Payment will result in "deadwood" being forced out of farming, creating opportunities for more progressive businesses.
- Progressive businesses, even those that currently rely on BPS, will learn to adapt.
- "Bring it on", but a period of transition is essential – the five years up to 2022 (stated as the proposed period of continuity of current support by M Filley) is a reasonable period.
- It's accepted that BPS support will move to Pillar Two (environmental) payments – the question is how will this be implemented?

There'll be more farm collaboration.

- Although this is generally seen as a progressive step, some "just can't work with the neighbours".

Change will generally create more upsides and opportunities for this group of farmers, despite a probable lowering of income (due to loss of farm subsidy) nationally.

- However, this group was hand-picked as progressive and forward-thinking, so may not reflect the national picture.
- Change may be hindered by those who can't adapt as easily as the more progressive businesses – eg landlords.

## **What's required to effect change?**

Honesty and openness.

- What does "Green Brexit" mean?
- What standards of animal welfare should be upheld, and what does this mean for imports?
- Who has the greater influence over Government when deciding farm policy – farmers or NGOs?

## **How will this be followed up?**

The intention is to feed this through to the conference as a basis for discussion

The fringe session on the Friday of the conference will then revisit the outcomes of the policy discussion and look at how the conference has specifically addressed these. From this, the intention is to:

- Establish some broad, UK Farming aims for 2018
- Encourage the ELs to establish their own individual aims they'll take home with them to their businesses.