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Why Agriculture needs an independent Britain

By Stuart Agnew MEP

UK Independence Party spokesman on agriculture

The tortuous three year process of CAP reform is grinding to a conclusion and no one is happy with the results. 28 countries with agricultural activities that extend from 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle to the South west corner of Crete have to be accommodated. Agricultural methods ranging from 550hp tractors in Norfolk to draft oxen in Cyprus as well as cultural differences in animal welfare and hygiene practices, make it impossible. Land is going to be taken out of production entirely, and even more land is to be wasted growing highly inefficient energy crops.

Complicating all of this is the new 'co-decision' rule which means that the European Parliament's agreement must be obtained alongside that of the Commission and the Council of Ministers. This has slowed things down and resulted in a great deal of 'no-decision'. A farming analogy would be that of a ewe with two milking teats and triplets to feed. One lamb usually loses out and the MEPs, desperately hoping for a few crumbs of compromise from the Council, find themselves in this role.

However, under UKIP's agricultural policy for an independent Britain, many of these difficulties fall away. Our policy is not yet complete, but we have made real progress and the key points are as follows:

- A UKIP Government would support agriculture with a simplified version of the Single Farm Payment. We cannot return to deficiency payments as they are not allowed under WTO rules and, to inflict something entirely new on farmers, such as counter-cyclical payments or crop price insurance, will be difficult for them. Crucially, DEFRA has spent eight years of blood, sweat and tears learning how to administer the SFP and this effort should not be wasted.
- We propose an SFP of £80 per acre on the lowlands (less pro-rata on uplands), to be capped at £120,000 or 1,500 acres (more acres on uplands, but same financial cap). Capping will not be popular with those affected, but the purpose of these payments is to keep a farming family going in hard times and it recognises that there are economies of scale. We do not expect to save money on acres lost to subsidy, we hope it will stimulate businesses to split and allow opportunities for new tenancies to be created which will qualify. However, we will be particularly tough on those who try to be too clever by using professionals to create networks of companies etc.
- To qualify for this payment, land must be farmed to ELS standard. There will be no modulation and no cross-compliance. We wish to make risk-takers the major recipients of the SFP. An extra column on the registration form will require a declaration for each field on which the applicant has financed agricultural activity. We wish to break the emerging mind-set that ownership of land automatically triggers a life-long pension.

- We will give additional help to hill farmers by taking advantage of the WTO's concession for limited headage payments on livestock.
- Having established that the subsidy is strongly linked to environmental good practice by the use of ELS, as a base standard, we will discontinue HLS schemes after their expiry. If, for example, the RSPB wants land to be farmed in a particular way, they should approach the farmer concerned and offer him a deal. County Councils will be able to offer grants to farmers in sensitive areas to adopt certain practices.
- The EU re-registration of pesticides will no longer apply. This means that pesticides which had full UK approval in the past can be offered for sale again. In particular, Asulam for bracken control and several minority products used in horticulture.
- We wish to conduct a scientific review of the maximum stipulated level of nitrate in water, currently set at 50 mgs per litre. The old British standard of 100 mgs resulted in no health issues whatsoever. The ground water in the soils on the eastern side of the UK is inherently between 50 and 100 mgs, making a reduction very difficult. Indeed, the study commissioned by the NFU into what measures would be required, concluded that, to keep within the maximum of 50 mgs, half of the arable land in East Anglia would need to be permanent un-grazed set-aside. Science needs to be applied here and we feel certain that a favourable movement of the limit is achievable.
- Rural crime is rampant and we believe that the County based farm watch groups should be taken more seriously by the police. We would insist that Police Commissioners share information and intelligence, rather than just receive it. Such co-operation is in everyone's interest.
- We believe that the removal of the reservoir of BTB from wildlife is essential to control the disease in cattle, and therefore support the concept of culling badgers, while there is no effective medication available. This subject is controversial, but hard, practical decisions have to be made.
- We propose a ban on the export of live animals for slaughter and we are the only mainstream political Party able to offer such a policy. The damage to the rural economy will be marginal, but the improvement in welfare standards and the image of British farming will be greatly enhanced.
- Whilst there is a law against the spreading of ragwort, there is no attempt to enforce it. We would require local councils to take responsibility for this and suggest that pulling ragwort is a useful way for prisoners and those with community service orders to spend their time. More motivated prisoners may wish to pass the PA 1 and equip themselves with a qualification for future employment.

There is a queue of other agricultural policies awaiting approval by our NEC. As we roll them out, I hope that they will stimulate the realisation that we are actually quite

capable of running our own agriculture and that the old EU honeymoon days of attractive intervention prices and tariff barriers are well and truly over.

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The author is a member of the National Farmers Union and served as their Norfolk County Chairman in 1998. He was also the Norfolk Delegate to the NFU HQ Council from 2000 to 2009, when he relinquished the position on being elected to the European Parliament. He is a member of the Parliament's Agriculture & Rural Development and Fisheries Committees. He farms in Norfolk (free range eggs, sheep and 400 acres of arable land).