

Crying the Moor 2022

Dr Sean Beer

Without doubt the Exmoor Society Spring Conference was excellent. For me, two of the highlights were the presentations by Exmoor farmers Victoria Eveleigh and John Richards. Both witnessed as to how difficult it is to make a living in agriculture, but at the same time how passionate they are about farming and about the environment of which they are part. In particular, Victoria's comment about the environmental adviser who told her, "trees are so last year", indicates the short-termism and "fashion" that underpins much environmental policy.

Tony Juniper was also very interesting. As you will know from last year's Review the current system of farm payments is to be phased out over time now that we are no longer in the European Union, to be replaced by payments that are more closely linked to nature conservation and recovery. Mr Juniper highlighted six ways in which this is to be funded/facilitated:

- The Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS)
- The Nature for Climate Fund (this seems to be focused mainly on tree planting and peat restoration)
- Biodiversity Net Gain development grants (by creating or enhancing habitats in association with building developments)
- Protected Area Networks
- Private Finance (possibly this referred to Financing Nature Recovery UK)
- The Species Recovery Task Force

Information is still limited on how all six initiatives are to contribute. This includes the ELMS which is to be the major focus of farm payments, without which many farms will lose their already limited economic viability. Farmers should be rewarded for the environmental goods that they provide. At the same time a timebomb is ticking.

There were strong sales of sheep at Cutcombe market in late April with Prime Hoggs to £140.50, New Season Lambs to £138.00, Cull Rams to £146.00, Cull Ewes to £140.00, and Store Hoggs to £103.50. This was followed by an excellent sale of store cattle in early May (EFL Auctions Limited 2022). Nationally finished cattle prices for 2021/2022 are up on the previous year. The finished lamb price was also up in the autumn, but fell below last year's price in the winter (Farmers Weekly 2022).

The above is all good news, but the feed wheat price is now significantly up on last year and here lies a key point for the future. The war in Ukraine is affecting global animal feed prices and fertilizer prices. Those farmers feeding concentrate feeds to their livestock (in particular pig, poultry, dairy, and some beef finishers) are already feeling this. For those on grass-based systems they may not currently feel the effects of feed price rises, however, they are certainly feeling the effect of fertiliser price rises. On the 8th of March fertilizer prices were surging towards £1,000 a tonne, up from about £650 the previous week, which was already 200% up on the previous year (Butler 2022). In the autumn, the consensus is that prices for cereals will also have risen considerably. It is in the autumn that farmers start to feed concentrates to overwinter animals and subsequently in the case of suckler beef and sheep units to prepare them for calving and lambing.

The Bank of England (2022) estimates that Inflation in the UK is likely to keep rising to around 10% this year and go down next year, falling back to 2% in about two years' time and. The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has indicated that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could cause a global food crisis and that this may last for years (Murphy 2022). Rising food prices in the shops - the UN estimates that global food prices have already risen 30% compared to last year (Murphy 2022) - are already affecting consumers. This is bound to reignite discussions of UK food security, particularly now that we are in a post Brexit world of UK negotiated trade agreements and the UK is currently only 54% self-sufficient in terms of the food on our plates (defra 2022). Whilst in a pure economic sense food is not a social good (as discussed at the conference), surely in the 21st-century everyone in the

UK (the fifth largest economy in the world – IMF 2021) should have access to enough good and wholesome food. This is going to be tough for everyone. If you have eaten today thank a farmer and should they not be paid a reasonable amount for the food they produce?

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