

The writing was on the wall

This month saw the sad demise of the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group. It has to be said that the writing has been on the wall for quite some time for the organisation. It strikes me that the reaction to its demise has been mostly sentimental. When I started my career it was the holy grail to become a FWAG adviser, even with the paltry salaries FWAG paid at the time several of my peers achieved that lofty status. However the organisation was no longer fit for purpose and one could say had had its day.

FWAG had, in the past, the benefit of Defra core funding, membership subscriptions, charitable status and distributed its marketing and promotional material in Defra and Natural England mail outs; it even had the benefit of a seconded Natural England employee as director of FWAG England for many years. Yet even given all these things FWAG could not make their model work anymore. It is a salutary tale about the times we live in and how the actions of one business can effect a whole sector.

FWAG constantly undersold and undervalued themselves charging ludicrously low rates for their services. Their engagement with Defra and its agencies on national contracts has led to the government undervaluing the service that the organisation provides to its members, the government and the public. It may sound harsh but not only have they run themselves out of business but devalued the whole sector. One has to ask whether commercial agriculture and indeed the environment is best served by charity. This "charitable" approach has contributed to farmers, the public and the government not taking agri-environment seriously, many believing that it can be done on the cheap.

Pick the right fight

The fact is that HLS for many farmers will mean receiving hundreds of thousands of pounds (the average is about £200k over ten years). Many already do realise and many more will have to, that post 2013



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"greening" will be a part of agri-business not just agri-environment. Surely commercial farming is best served by commercial advice, and the same goes for the environment. If we are to take the concept of non-market goods/eco-systems services seriously they need to be part of business not the realm of charities.

In a similar vein one has to also question whether the Campaign for the Farmed Environments voluntary approach was the right one too. In the South East at least we shouldn't have given up on the argument about data collection and how much un-cropped land had actually been lost or to what extent SP5 recording simply didn't capture the true picture. The CFE certainly seems to be dead in the water now given Ciolos' proposals. We need to make sure we pick the right arguments to have and win them and in this regard the NFU is as guilty as Defra in undermining their own negotiating positions. Peter Kendall is rightly angry at the Commission's proposals to "fossilise" 95% of the permanent grassland fields across the EU, but to continue to expound the virtues of CFE as a means to avoid the greening

proposals seems deluded. The EU have clarified that Environmental Stewardship could count towards the Ecological Focus Areas but the question of whether we can still get paid on these areas too remains.

Greenwash

Given that "greening" is a theme that is here to stay surely the debate must move to how we could deploy ES both under Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 in order to fulfil the Commissions desire for a greened CAP. Perhaps elements of ELS could come into P1 leaving more money for targeted HLS measures under P2. And let's not forget that P2 funding has revitalised a good deal of agricultural infrastructure in the last five years, new

cold stores, grain stores, reservoirs, renewables projects etc etc and it would be nice to think that this important function is not overlooked in the "greenwash" debate.

The demise of FWAG is certainly a shame, given the good work that they have done over the years and it is particularly harsh for the many excellent local staff that the organisation employed but the writing has been on the wall for a very long time.



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