

POOR POORER POOREST; RICH RICHER RICHEST

Just what is productivity anyway?

I have a love hate relationship with the Spring, I think a lot of people do. It's exciting, it's vibrant, it's full of promise and new life, growth and renewal. It's also been a long time coming, frustrating, already hinting at missed opportunities, not to mention exceedingly busy! It's not just the spring crops that have had a late start (if you managed to get them started at all) the annual paperwork mountain seems bigger than ever thanks to the late opening of BPS online and the very late arrival of stewardship claim forms.

While I am flat out trying to fit everything in before 15 May, I am not always convinced that I am as productive as I could be. The government clearly thinks that as a sector we should be more productive and indeed, perhaps surprisingly, they identify "Agricultural Productivity" (together with "Rural Resilience") as a "public good". The DEFRA consultation document – Health and harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a green Brexit – poses many (leading) questions on the subject of improving productivity without really stating what is meant by productivity. Productivity, the measure of output per unit input, is not necessarily the same as profitability, but the inference in the document is that more productive farms will be more profitable.

The implication that farmers are not as productive as they ought to be obviously does not sit well with some farmers I speak to, to put it mildly. However, while many farmers do their utmost to be as

productive (and profitable) as possible, it can hardly be denied that as a whole we could do more (but can we do more with less?). The policy mandarins who claim to want our views in the consultation, would do well to recognise why we are where we are, and it can't all be blamed on the CAP. We know that there are acres and acres of unutilised and underutilised land in the South East but the reasons why are complex; land and property prices, cost of living, rent, inheritance tax, the subsidy system (including Stewardship), not to mention the price of food, all conspire to ensure land goes underused and unused. In other words, it is a direct consequence of policy. That land though has other products. Carbon sequestration, clean water, biodiversity, recreation and the consultation recognises that future policy should include paying for these "public goods". There is recognition that land in Stewardship schemes has generated estimated annual greenhouse gas savings of 1.5 megatonnes of CO₂ equivalent and that for every £1 invested through agri-environment schemes, this delivers £2 to £6 worth of benefits. These two facts alone suggest to me that there is a good deal of scope for lobbying for an increase in the payment rates that we currently see in Pillar 2 type schemes.

The policy proposals are largely bold and brave, except, and notably, when it comes to trade and economics where there is very little detail or even vision. For those whose businesses have been shaped by responding to policy, it is often the implementation that is more testing than the

policy itself. We know that stewardship schemes are undersubscribed as a direct result of the appalling way they have been administered. The "environmental productivity" of the countryside has suffered as a direct consequence of less wild bird seed mixes and fenced hedges. I do fear that asking for suggestions to improve and simplify CSS, as they do in the consultation, misses the point. It needs scrapping entirely. I am certain that a return to ELS and HLS would see uptake increase, especially if it were coupled with proper clarity for inspections rather than the myriad of interpretations and misunderstandings of the very principles of stewardship that has seen farmers fined for too much habitat, be it scrub, scrapes, water, ditches, marsh and hedges.

However you look at it, doing more with less is certainly going to be the reality for many farms, especially those whose businesses are underpinned by BPS. It is worth reading the consultation document at the very least, even if responding to it looks like a daunting task. There are some clear steers that merit relating to your business and reviewing how sensitive it will be to the changes afoot. From the year after next, BPS will be cut or capped very significantly and from 2024/5 it will be gone. What will you do about it?

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