

Future of Scottish Agriculture Consultation Event

Inverness, 13 November 2015

Summary

Background

In June 2015 the Scottish Government released a discussion document, The Future of Scottish Agriculture, setting out a vision and strategy for farming in Scotland in the next decades. It is an open consultation, with the Government keen to spread the debate beyond the usual suspects.

Nourish Scotland is supporting this initiative by organising a series of 8 events across Scotland in November 2015. The events are opportunities to reflect on, discuss and influence the direction agriculture should be going. To support these events, Nourish has also produced a briefing paper outlining the scale of farming in Scotland, discussing some of the challenges faced by the sector and summarising the Scottish Government's document. Summaries will be produced of all these meetings and Nourish will also collate an over-arching response to the consultation, drawing on the themes put forward during these events.

Attendance

16 people came together at Merkinch community center in Inverness to explore these proposals. Attendees included representatives of the NFUS, the Scottish Crofting Federation and the Young Crofters Association, local food producers and community organisers.

Format

The event was framed around 3 questions:

- What is farming for?
- What benefits do we get from farming and how should we pay for these?
- How does farming need to change to survive and prosper?

The workshop activities were carried out in small groups with some plenary feedback and discussion. Participants explored together the questions above, the vision, and key areas of the consultation. Participants were also encouraged to think about how they or their organisation could contribute to the future of Scottish farming and how the various actors can work together more effectively.

We began by introducing the 3 questions above. Attendees then heard a springboard statement to help frame the issues and give some context for discussion in the small groups. This statement was a 5 minute presentation, with accompanying slides, highlighting some of the current issues in farming, such as climate change and emissions, an aging demographic, supplier relationships and income levels for farming and the contribution of the sector to jobs, the environment, the rural economy and the overall food and drink sector.

After this general overview, we had invited Jo Hunt from Knockfarrel farm to share some of his experiences, the challenges he faces and how he sees the future. He outlined the economics of producing and selling food locally, and the difficulty he has making ends meet. A major reason for this is that he doesn't get paid for any of the public benefits he's bringing as an organic farmer, such as healthy food, carbon

storage and jobs. He would like to see the full costs and benefits of production reflected in our food prices.

What is farming for? What benefits does it provide? How does it need to change?

After our springboard session, we asked attendees to work in small groups to reflect on and discuss the question of “What is farming for”?

Most common responses to this question included:

- Producing healthy, nourishing food for people / the local community
- Providing meaningful and useful work
- Caring for the local environment to preserve and enhance it for future generations

Others added:

- Community
- Maintaining access to land for leisure
- Maintaining the cycle of life: sowing, harvesting, feeding people
- Educating people
- Helping towards self-sufficiency
- Leaving wild spaces where nature does its thing, encouraging biodiversity
- Stewardship of land, seeds, animal diversity
- Diversifying landscapes
- Providing income for people to remain in rural areas
- Feeding the social structure, by bringing people together and healing the wounds of disharmony
- Providing raw material for other industries
- Offering a place to learn, share and have fun (-no x-boxes!)
- Enabling food security
- Creating carbon sinks and generating non-carbon energy
- Keeping traditions and heritage for the future
- Scotland’s image/place in the world
- “My kids, so they can do it too!”
- “For a majority, not a minority”

People also commented:

- There’s a gap between what farming is at the moment and what it could be for. Currently, it’s filling a demand for a ‘product’ and is providing jobs to high up managers, but it could link people to the land, grow healthy food and provide jobs at all levels of food production.
- We should widen the question and ask not only what farming is for, but what crofting, community growing, urban growing, etc is for.
- We must consider related questions such as “What is land for?”

We then asked attendees to identify what benefits we receive from farming and how they should be paid for. Responses included:

- We need to look more holistically at the benefits of farming: social benefits, population retention, public goods, tourism (agri-, green- and food tourism)
- Public money should be used for the public good

Finally we asked attendees to suggest how farming should change to survive and prosper in the future. Responses included:

- Currently, it's distilleries, salmon businesses, whiskey multinationals and supermarkets making most of the profits in/of Scottish agriculture. Profits need to be distributed more equitably along the supply chain, with a fair share for farmers

Vision

We then moved on to looking at the Scottish Government's vision for the Future of Scottish Agriculture. We first asked attendees to identify what they liked about it, what aspects of the vision were attractive to them and what words they were most drawn to.

Participants underlined the emphasis on:

- Resilience –if this means “able to adapt to market changes”. Small, diverse agri-businesses are more able to lessen financial blows than big, monoculture farms.
- Innovation –learning, sharing best practice
- Communities
- Green, innovative, profitable - You cannot achieve any of them without the others
- Outward-looking: if this means being aware of new technologies and of the environment, not being stuck in the past or stuck in your ways.

Attendees were then asked to put identify how the vision could be improved.

Participants questioned the use of the following bold words and added the italic ones:

“Scotland has a green, innovative and **profitable agriculture industry**, which is **outward-looking** and resilient, supporting our **economic growth**, *health*, environment and urban and rural communities and contributing to *local, national and global* food security.”

Comments included:

- *Green* – should refer to carbon balance and waste. Many wondered if “green” was the right word and whether it was specific enough.
- *Profitable* – for whom? More of the profits made should benefit farmers of all sizes.
- *Agriculture industry* – many commented that agriculture is not an “industry” as such and that this word has negative connotations. Some proposed to just talk about “agriculture” or “food production”, others to take the health of people and the environment as the starting point of the vision, rather than the state of the “industry” itself.
- *Global* – focus instead on local, Scottish. Many participants questioned the focus on export, noting increasing greenhouse gas emissions from transport and the environmental costs of having to scale up agriculture for it to be able to compete on the global market, e.g. large-scale dairies.
- *Economic growth*
 - should benefit the many and not the few
 - should be about more than GDP or industry profits made, and should account for the true cost of food production, including public health outcomes and environmental impact
 - should be replaced by a “stable economy” as the ultimate aim
- The vision needs to include a quality element, ie “good” food etc, as well as explicitly linking agriculture to health and well-being.

- The vision needs to include mention of ownership and security of land for farmers.

Key Issues

We gave our attendees a sheet with 6 key areas marked up onto it. We also left two spaces blank for attendees to capture any other areas that came up in discussion.

We prompted them by asking 6 key questions:

- How do we encourage new entrants into farming and make sure that it is an attractive career option?
- How do we improve training, support and advice to farmers?
- How do we better target our research and make sure it is used effectively?
- How can we make our farming practices more environmentally friendly, while ensuring farmers can earn a living in a competitive global market?
- Are there new models of working that we need to develop? New ways of buying and selling?
- How can we support our farmers and communities to work together more closely?

On new entrants, attendees said, we need:

- To ensure young farmers moving through the sector can access grants – sometimes they don't count as 'new entrants' because they e.g. had a few sheep before
- To enable access to land by encouraging succession and community buy-outs of land, as well as a fund to buy up farm land/crofts to make available to new entrants and zoned/designated land for new entrants
- More accessible sources of starter funding
- Longer-term rental agreements: 10 years instead of just one
- Mortgages on tenancies
- New entrants targets
- More apprenticeships
- A 'dating agency' between aging farmers and new entrants to match up people with farms

On the provision of training, support and advice, attendees said, we need:

- To break the monopoly of SRUC on agricultural education; SRUC is too heavily weighted to "industry" and not to smaller-scale, local food production
- Food horticulture courses in Scotland – CAP subsidies could be used for this
- To focus on developing marketing skills
- Support for Nourish Scotland to continue the New Farmer Programme
- To improve informal training; mentoring, support networks, experiential learning
- To put agriculture on schools' curriculum

On research, attendees said, we need:

- To aid small-scale production
- To research organic varieties and disease resistance
- To examine case studies of existing initiatives and their benefits, such as care/social farming and crofting.
- State-funded research
- An "Organic Farming Centre" in Scotland
- Free online access for farmers to all research

- Farmer-led research projects, including funding
- An UHI lab involving farmers/crofters in producer-based research
- Rotation trials in more marginal areas

On new ways of working, attendees said, we need:

- A “stable economy” agenda, instead of focus on growth – on a national, local and farm level
- A shift from oil-based agriculture to post-oil
- More social enterprises and cooperatives
- More community growing
- Local food hubs, community outlets and food coops
- Local, small-scale processing facilities and abattoirs
- To make more use of crowd-funding

On environment, attendees said, we need:

- More incentives and support for organic farming (this was mentioned often) – but we have to question whether large-scale organic farming is sustainable
- To safeguard prime agricultural land
- To prioritise local production for local people
- To repopulate the land, while also rewild it
- To protect pollinators
- A tax on carbon pollution and payments for carbon sequestration
- Payments for the creation of healthy soils / soil organic matter
- Soil and water protection/retention
- A GM-free Scotland
- Lower external input into farms
- More CAP to go from pillar 1 to 2
- Equitable land value
- Consumer education that less processing (e.g. cleaning of vegetables) is beneficial and on the importance of seasonal eating
- Planning controls on fast food outlets in deprived areas

On supporting our farmers, attendees said, we need:

- To make sure all public procurement of food is local/national produce
- To reassess VAT on unhealthy food and put no VAT on healthy food
- To price carbon
- To replace current (organic) certification schemes with peer-to-peer certification
- To support diversification
- Clear messages from the government – what do farmers need to focus on; production, environment, profitability?
- The CAP to support mixed farms rather than the agribusiness
- A change from land-based assessment of CAP
- Land reform for tenant farmers to allow purchase of land and improve security

Other issues identified included:

- Health, we need:
 - To support care farming and social farming
 - To reward farmers for growing healthy food, while at the same time tax sugar and ban sponsorship by drinks’ companies.
 - The NHS to prescribe healthy food from local farms
 - To measure Gross National Health

- More coherent food policy
- Raising public awareness, connecting people with where their food comes from

Conclusion

At the end of the time spent on key issues, we had a quick round of table feedback, ensuring that tables could hear what others had come up with. The post-its and flip-charts from earlier sessions on the 3 key questions and the vision were also posted around the room for viewing.

Nourish then provided a very brief verbal summary of the key themes arising from discussion. Attendees were thanked for their time and their contributions, and encouraged to respond directly to the Scottish Government consultation, via email or appropriate social media channels.

Finally, in concluding, we asked attendees to consider what they or their organisation could do to contribute to the future of Scottish farming and how we can work more effectively together.