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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2016

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Direction needed to shape farming future

By Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive
 It's still too early to have expected our Government ministers and those with responsibilities in the devolved nations to have said anything very concrete about Brexit plans, but this is a frustrating time. There is real energy from farming bodies to want to start planning, yet we don't know the direction of travel.



Ironically, since the referendum, the lamb trade has been strong. This is welcome indeed, but while the vote undoubtedly influenced currency conditions, making exports easier and imports harder, we can't rely on it lasting and there will be much more ahead that will affect our success. Post EU-exit, trade relationships with our current partners both inside and outside the EU is going to affect our industry massively, as will trade development with potential new partners.

We will soon need some political direction, particularly around the trade-offs we might accept over access to the single market balanced against the free movement of people. However, it is already clear we are limited in what can be negotiated with new trade agreements until we are a lot further down this road.

Trade partners

It is encouraging to see discussions with trade partners are taking place. These will prepare the ground for more rapid completion when the day comes – but it has been worrying our officials have had to be reminded food and agriculture needs to be included in discussions, and worrying too that if we are not careful agriculture may be the sacrificial lamb that is offered for the benefit of other industries.

A free trade agreement with Australia, for example, may well be beneficial for our finance and service industries, and it may even look good for the trade balance in total – but if it crushes our lamb market by allowing open volumes of tariff-free lamb to hit our shelves then it cannot be allowed to happen. Historically agriculture has had to be dealt with outside of more general trade agreements and, although it may not be popular politically, I suspect we will have to make that case again.

Since the referendum, NSA has been keen to start fishing out thoughts for the future and all our regions have had the opportunity for a structured consultation discussion covering headings of trade, farm support, regulation and 'other', to collect views and priorities. It has been encouraging to see this feedback coming

in, and at this early stage, to get a sense of relative unity and acceptance of change. Getting our positions and ideas identified is essential, but the first battle will be maintaining the budget beyond 2020 to support farming and food, and ensuring some level of equality and collegiate approach across the UK.

Getting a successful exit from the EU is a seismic challenge, although it possibly offers opportunities on the same scale. To get it right I believe we are better placed if we draw on the strength and expertise of others. NSA has therefore joined forces with a collaboration of 13 UK livestock-related bodies. It is not the intention of this group to agree on everything or to come out with one position, but to share expertise and offer help and assistance to ministers and civil servants.

Post-EU priorities

The foundation for trade with our current EU partners will be the first priority and progress with our negotiating position is expected by the close of this year, probably in advance of officially triggering our exit. Further down the road is the future of farm support and we will come back to this in future editions of this magazine.

The future of regulations will relate closely to trade and any hopes of mass deregulation are, in my view, vastly unlikely. If we want trade we will have to provide assurances adequate to satisfy our customers' demands. But there will be no more blaming Brussels and we will have to work hard and be creative to ensure a secure regulatory platform with simplified enforcement, and to use our various farm assurance/certification schemes more to provide confidence and trust.

More on lamb trade and promotions on page 12. More on Brexit on page 19.

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Front page

The front page picture is by professional photographer Wayne Hutchinson and features Rough Fell ewes farmed near Sedbergh, Cumbria. As a native breed to Cumbria, these particular Rough Fells were pictured on the Howgill Fells between the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales.

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