

Recognition of public goods to ensure a thriving future for farmers, sheep and the environment

A packed seminar tent demonstrated the depth of interest for the future of farm support as NSA Chairman Bryan Griffiths led a panel of industry experts at the NSA Sheep Event on Wednesday 18th July. The second seminar of the day, titled 'Recognition of public goods to ensure a thriving future for farmers, sheep and the environment' focused on how support payments of the future should be delivered.

Trade is fundamentally important whilst facing a period of change and with the phasing out of the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) looming, it is unclear of where financial farm support may come from. Currently the pot of government money is fixed until 2022 but it is between now and then that the government need to establish a way forward that will help support farmers.

Attendees at the seminar heard how the public and consumers of sheep products have little understanding of what the BPS does in terms of supporting farmers. The government cannot continue to pay the money if the industry cannot explain what it is used for. The industry must therefore know where it is heading before the transition takes place and now is the opportunity to restructure existing criteria.

The panel informed the audience on suggestions that public spending must be of benefit to the public. The new proposed system of recognising public goods must be rewarded and reflected in an additional support system. Things such as soil quality, water management and animal health and welfare all have an indirect impact on the environment and therefore the public.

If the industry is accepting public money then they have to be listened to. Farmers must inspire and enthuse each other in what they do to enable encouragement and belief of the sheep sector. Businesses will not have the confidence to invest as the outcome is unsure. Is food production deemed as a public good? If yes then there has to be efficient, productive systems within environmental boundaries.

Currently the UK are world leaders in animal health with some of our counter parts becoming more increasingly interested in food safety, such as China. A key focus needs to be on disease eradication and build-up of disease resistance. The question has to be asked, where are farms spending their money on animal health and what effects does that have on output?

Sheep farmers have a substantial amount of permanent pasture and this should be rewarded for when the new payment schemes are finalised. Every farmer and producer are tending to the countryside which in turn benefits the environment. The government will want value for money when designing the new payments and as carers of the countryside this should be recognised. Less favoured area farmers provide human ecology of the countryside and interlinked with that is a social fabric.

The key factors to the next successful scheme are a substantial reduction in an outbreak of endemic diseases and the effect and impact farm businesses can have on the environment. Efficient productivity requires less input to maximise output. Phil Stocker, the NSA chief executive told visitors at the sheep event that primarily food production is a public good and is of public benefit.

Leadership is required on a national level, but good leadership is vital at farm level. To eradicate any negativity everyone needs to be on board. Funding must be available for everyone and an industry body should drive this with the government supporting industry efforts.

Belief that whatever the government and concerning bodies decide regarding future payment schemes some outcomes must be met. Things such as supporting farmers investments to allow improvement that have a positive effect on efficiency, health and welfare, the environment and public well-being.

Producers and governing bodies need to build up a national picture for the consumer. Industry bodies can help to facilitate this by data sharing. Availability on health records, production systems and breeding policies will give not only the farmer but the public a better understanding of the industry. Benchmarking is important for implementing improvements and will allow a competitive market to be gently challenged.

The way forward is to design agreements, pilot new schemes and incorporate environmental and land management. Money distribution is changing, and all sheep producers need to be aware of what public goods schemes are on offer over the next few years. Consideration must be taken for the farm business by shielding your risk of failure and improvising on opportunity.