

President's Speech

Sustainable Agriculture: Food, Farming and the Environment Conference Friday 7th June 2019

Ladies and gentlemen, a very warm welcome to Pentre for NFU Cymru's first Sustainable Agriculture: Food, Farming and the Environment Conference.

I am delighted to be able to host this important event at my farm and that so many of you – politicians, policy makers, academics, campaigners, industry representatives and farmers – have taken the time to join us today.

This is both a pivotal and critical time for the food and farming sector – probably the industry most affected by the decision to leave the EU.

With Welsh Government in the process of designing a new agricultural policy, we are presented with a unique opportunity to shape the future of Welsh farming.

Last autumn, in response to the Welsh Government 'Brexit and our Land' consultation, we restated our policy ask around the development of a sustainable agricultural programme.

A policy based on three cornerstones of stability, productivity and the environment that combine to give a truly integrated and sustainable agriculture programme that will continue to deliver and enhance our contribution to the well-being of Wales.

NFU Cymru and farmers across Wales ask Welsh Government to rise to our challenge....

....to develop a policy that:

- enhances farmers' ability to produce food for the nation, giving us greater security in the supply of safe, traceable and affordable quality Welsh food, that the public trusts.
- A policy that underpins growth in the Welsh food and drink sector – Wales's biggest employer;
- That drives investment, innovation and productivity;
- And promotes rural jobs and supports social and cultural well-being;
- A policy that increases financial resilience of our farm businesses;
- improves environmental performance and use of natural resources; and
- contributes to the maintenance and enhancement of our treasured Welsh landscape

As farmers, we also want to rise to society's environmental challenge....

....to be the first generation to leave the environment better off than how we found it.

That is no reflection or criticism on previous generations. I am the third generation to farm here at Pentre. My forefathers have farmed Mynydd Epynt for generations. I am extremely proud of their legacy and what they have achieved.

However, over time science and knowledge has changed. The challenge of feeding an ever growing world population has not. In short we need to produce more but impact less.

Fundamentally, as farmers we know, without sound management of the environment, enhancing of habitats, protection of wildlife and support for pollinators and soils, we do not have businesses.

And the countryside needs us!

With farming occupying over 80% of the Welsh landmass, farmers play an irreplaceable role in shaping the countryside we all enjoy today.

Every sector - livestock, dairy, arable, upland, lowland, organic, conventional and tenanted – and every type of farm continues to carry out a huge amount of work to maintain and enhance our iconic Welsh landscapes, encourage wildlife, improve soil and water quality and reduce our climate impacts.

Farmers have a unique perspective on the farmed environment because they see and manage the whole picture on a day to day basis. Optimising environmental outcomes whilst producing safe, affordable and traceable food is key.

Today, it gives me great pleasure to launch our ‘Sustainable Agriculture: Food, Farming and the Environment Report’.

Policies being designed today, by Welsh Government, will shape the future of food production and our environment for years to come.

So at this critical time, we need a balanced, honest appraisal of the current state of the farmed environment.

NFU Cymru is uniquely placed to produce such a report, to provide a critical eye of where there is more to do, and to champion best practice amongst our strong and growing membership.

The report also sets out what farmers would like to see happen, and what support they need from government to continue enhancing the farmed environment and their own food producing businesses.....and this point is crucial.

The bottom line is that farm businesses need to be productive, profitable and progressive to be able to continue to deliver the environmental benefits we all want to see.

I want today’s event to mark the start of a new dialogue about our farmed environment – a conversation where farmers are recognised as the solution.

For the purpose of the report we've approached the environment as five key themes – improving biodiversity and wildlife; soil health; water; air and climate and finally landscape and access which ties all of these together. Farmers in the audience will, of course, know that you cannot manage the environment in such silos – everything interacts.

Our report looks at the progress already being made, whether there is the potential to do more, and highlights examples of best practice from within our membership across Wales.

Most importantly of all, this report is aspirational. It celebrates some of the excellent work our members are already doing up and down Wales. A brief snapshot of which will be shared with you later today.

Farmers like Alex Higgs – who, over 40 years, has worked to improve a range of habitats on her farm whilst also producing world renowned beef and lamb.

Farmers like Walter Simon – whose commitment to producing top quality potatoes for Welsh consumers starts with a focus on healthy soils.

Farmers like our Deputy President, Aled Jones – who recognises his environmental and social responsibilities whilst being efficient and productive, appreciating our role as farmers to protect our natural resources.

Farmers like Harri Parri – who works year on year to optimise his on-farm resources and improve his farm business efficiency and in doing so is reducing the greenhouse gas emissions intensity per unit of production – kg of beef or lamb – produced.

Farmers like Guto Davies – who through the careful management of grazing livestock is optimising the carbon storage potential of peat on his farm.

Farmers like William Lawrence – who takes great pride in the management of his farmed landscape that welcomes thousands of visitors from Wales and all over the world each year.

Looking at this report, one thing is abundantly clear.....agriculture, our environment, our landscapes, our communities, our culture and our heritage are all connected.

This connectivity is brought to life when I consider my own farming enterprise here at Pentre:

Where we are proud to produce Welsh black beef for Waitrose and prime Welsh lamb - a product so deeply associated with Wales

Where 9% of the farm is woodland

Where over three quarters of the farm is grassland playing a vital role in carbon sequestration

Where we grow no less than seven crops annually including crops for pollinating insects and wild bird cover providing a diversity of habitats for wildlife and reducing reliance on bought in feeds

Where we now have almost 10 miles of habitat connectivity - including over 8.5 miles of new, coppiced and established hedgerows as well as two streamside corridors and nine ponds.

Where we utilise techniques such as soil sampling and slurry injection to make best use of on farm nutrients

Where our native breeds of sheep graze the Epynt training area delivering environmental benefits and specific outcomes, like reduced fire risk, for the MOD.

Where we contribute to our local communities not only through direct employment, but through supporting local businesses each year.

Where supporting the young people in our community is a key priority whether it be through hosting training activities for agriculture students or hosting the Brecknock YFC Rally as we did just last weekend – an event that saw many members and supporters gather here at Pentre

Where on an annual basis we welcome over a thousand visitors from as far away as Australia to our holiday accommodation to experience the best that Wales has to offer.

And where we aim to move forward as a progressive farm business, whilst never forgetting our past and the farming families lost and Welsh speaking communities displaced from Mynydd Epynt as part of the second world war effort.

We are Welsh farming!

This is Welsh farming!

In Wales, I am optimistic that we have the legislative framework and the ways of working to recognise this connectivity.

In the context of Brexit, I believe we can move forward to develop and deliver a truly sustainable vision for Welsh agriculture that does beyond seeking to balance or compromise a number of seemingly competing objectives, but rather aims to develop a vision that embraces equally the environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects of sustainability.

As Welsh farmers, managing 80% of the land area of Wales, we are uniquely placed to deliver a full range of environmental outcomes alongside our role as food producers.

As an industry I am clear there is more we can do.

Our aspiration to reach Net Zero Greenhouse Gas Emissions for Agriculture by 2040 is just one statement of our commitment to the environment and addressing the big global challenges we all face.

This Conference aims to start a new conversation about how we, as farmers, can be enabled to do that.

I am clear this has to be done on the basis of evidence, on the development of a shared understanding and through collaboration and genuine partnership.

On the development of an approach that recognises and respects that farmers have a unique knowledge and perspective on the farmed environment and also a unique contribution to make in its ongoing management and enhancement going forward.

We are up for the challenge and ready to work in partnership to deliver the outcomes we all want to see, in line with our ambition to become globally recognised as leaders in sustainable agriculture underpinning economic, environmental, social and cultural well-being in Wales and delivering for our economy, our rural communities, the environment and society.

Thank you.