



HILL FARMING MATTERS: A GATHERING FOR ALL THOSE COMMITTED TO FARMING IN THE FELLS, DALES AND MOORS

Nearly 100 hill farmers from the Lake District, the East Fellside, the Howgills and a contingent of hill farmers from the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors met in conference at Melmerby last week. The gathering was part of an initiative being run by the Fells and Dales LEADER+ Programme and the Carnegie UK Trust on sustaining hill farming communities in the North of England. Listening to and participating in the debate were a number of policy makers from Defra's Uplands and Commons Branch, Natural England and three of the North of England's National Parks.

The conference was chaired by Geoff Brown of the LEADER+ Programme who began by pointing out that although 2007 turned out to be a very difficult year for hill farming, 2008 was a new year and that the intention was to have a positive and forward-looking gathering. The LEADER+ Programme was concerned to assist the hill farming community to make a better case for itself with policy makers, to take what decisions it can for itself and to fly the flag for hill farming.

The first part of the programme was devoted to looking at the big picture. Veronica Waller from the Hill Farming project spoke on hill farmers' responses to change as evidenced by a survey of the changes they were making to their businesses. There was a very noticeable reduction in the amount of

pure hill breeding and a corresponding increase in the production of crossbred lambs. Terry McCormick and Liz Wilton demonstrated the Hill Farm Charter website that was being developed to highlight the economic, social and environmental contribution of hill farmers. It was suggested that hill farmers were committed to farming in the fells; conserving the land and natural resources; collaborating with other farmers and communicating about what they did with members of the public.

Can hill farming landscapes be managed without farmers?

Susan Denyer, an internationally renowned expert on cultural landscapes, gave the keynote address, posing the question: "Can hill landscapes be managed without farmers?" She pointed out that upland landscapes have high value for people and defined cultural landscape as the interaction between people and the environment. She linked this to the campaign to have the Lake District inscribed as a World Heritage Site – the aim of which was not to make a museum of the landscape, but to sustain the farming processes that link culture and nature and people with their environment. She was very critical of organisations which took a single issue view on birds, heather, climate change and stressed the importance of the processes which sustain landscapes. She talked about the importance of the cultural as well as the ecological health of the



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uplands which was dependant on the farming skills, knowledge and critical mass of people to sustain the communities involved. There was a need to address clearly the link between farming processes and the value of the uplands. There were thankfully some signs of changing perceptions, but the hill farming community needed to be pro-active about its role and its importance.

Can hill farming work with nature?

Pat Thompson, RSPB's upland conservation officer, dealt with the question "Can hill farming work with nature?" He turned the question on its head and asked whether nature could work without hill farming and the answer was "yes", but things would be different and probably not desirable. There was a need to look for joint interests and a need to have a multi-objective approach to how we use the land. Farmers needed to be rewarded for delivery of public benefits that underpin wider economic activity in the uplands. There also needed to be better support for High Nature Value farming systems and there was a need to engage the public in this debate.

Can we make economic sense of hill farming?

The next speaker, Gwyn Jones, also pointed out the value to people of High Nature Value farming systems, such as was found on Skye where until recently he worked as an advisor for the Scottish Agricultural College. The great difficulty, however, was keeping farming going. The heart of the problem was an inherent lack of profitability especially in the hill sheep sector. He emphasised the fact that only 40 lambs were available for sale out of every 100 hill ewes on Skye and that net margin per lamb sold, he estimated, was a loss of £42.50 without costs of labour being included! The total cost of keeping 100 ewes was £3200, which if the Single Payment and the less favoured area support were used, still showed a loss of £1000 per 100 ewes. He pointed out that a positive £3000 or more might be made from doing the minimum in farming terms to receive the Single farm Payment and the less favoured area support and using the time freed up from farming to earn money from elsewhere.

He thought that although there was possibly a positive message being given in relation to native breed hill cattle, no such message was forthcoming about hill sheep – something that was clearly needed. He challenged the policy makers and asked "what do you really want?"; "at what scale do you want it?" and "have you investigated the real costs?"

Replacement for the Hill Farm Allowance

Will Cockbain, NFU Hill Farming Spokesman provided up to date information on proposals for the replacement scheme for the Hill Farm Allowance. The principles underlying the Upland Entry Level Scheme were explained by Mervyn Edwards of Natural England who is a member of the national technical group devising the new scheme. Members of the audience indicated their general support for what seemed to be an emerging emphasis on the principle of active grazing, self contained flocks and the use of native breeds and their crosses.

In general discussion about the future, there was a good deal of emphasis on supporting young entrants, with some people feeling that in some parts of the hills we had already gone below the necessary critical mass of farmers and shepherds required to sustain the system, with affordable and appropriate housing for young hill farmers being an important issue. Although farmers were beginning to understand their wider role, the need for profitability from the core activity of livestock production was crucial.

Peter Allen from Bampton and a board member of both Natural England and the North West Development Agency congratulated the LEADER+ Programme and Carnegie UK Trust for organising the meeting and emphasised the importance of an approach which brought in the whole community. The meeting concluded with a strong feeling that there was a need to keep up the momentum on the importance of hill farming and a large number of the attendees expressed an interest in being kept in touch and being involved in the development of a campaign in support of the sector and its community.

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Results from the lunch time exercise

The participants were invited to take part in an exercise to choose the most important solutions for a viable hill farm and hill farming industry.

The hill farmers' top five solutions for a viable hill farm were as follows:

1. Farming with wildlife to get best environmental payments (69% of all farmers)
2. Cost reductions by decreasing external inputs (i.e. energy and feed) (57%)
3. Maintaining native breeds in hefted flocks (54%)
4. Grow public awareness of hill farming through organizing farm visits (48%)
5. Adopt 'easy care' systems (45%)



The top five policy solutions were:

- Government and EU to value the role of hill farming in the maintenance of the landscape (86%)
- Recognise the public goods delivered by hill farming (66%)
- Enhance budget for hill farm support (63%)
- Give help to young people to get started in hill farming (57%)
- Food industry support for sustainable hill farming industry (54%)

The hill farmers attending recognized that obtaining support payments for enhancing wildlife and biodiversity on their farms is providing a crucial income stream. This coupled with maintaining low-intensity, low-input farming systems are core ingredient for business viability.

In terms of policy, the participants would like to see policy makers more aware of the links between hill farming systems, not only with

biodiversity but with the landscape and other public goods. They would like them to be clear that hill farming systems are truly deserving of greater support, and design policy and schemes in a way that such support reaches them.

