

**Date:** Wednesday 11 October 2000  
**Time:** 9.00am to 12.20pm  
**Venue:** Committee Room, National Assembly Building

## **REPORT OF THE ASSEMBLY SECRETARY FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **FUTURE DIRECTION FOR WELSH AGRICULTURE**

1. All members of the Committee are conscious, as I am, of the need to articulate a long-term direction for the future of Welsh agriculture, and the steps that the National Assembly and others can take to help it move in that direction. In doing this, we need to take account of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability. We must also be realistic: realistic about the market pressures on the industry, and realistic about what the National Assembly can do.

2. The foundations for this work have already been laid. The consultation on "Farming for the Future" has helped to shape the Rural Development Plan for Wales, and the Objective 1 SPD. I now want to build on this. I am therefore setting up a group, drawn from experts in Welsh farming, food and the countryside, to advise me in the task of preparing a vision and supporting action on the future of farming in Wales. I will chair the group, and I will announce the membership shortly. My aim is to publish the document next Spring.

3. The process of producing the document will be an open one. Drafts discussed in the group will be circulated to the Committee, and will be made public on the internet. I will of course be discussing the issues with members of other parties, and with other key interests, over the course of the coming months, and I propose to put the draft document to the Committee for formal discussion prior to publication.

### **RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

4. The Rural Development Plan for Wales was passed by the STAR Committee, a key European Commission committee on Thursday 21 September. This is a major step towards the National Assembly's plans to boost the wider rural economy; all that remains is the formal approval letter from the Commission. The Plan has been drawn up through close and extensive consultation with farming organisations, a wide range of rural interests and key public agencies, including National Assembly Members. I would like to record my personal thanks to all who contributed. They will, of course, have a continuing role in helping to ensure that the priorities and objectives in the Plan are delivered.

5. In anticipation of formal approval, we are pressing ahead with work to implement the various

measures within the Plan, such as the Tir Mynydd scheme, the reopening of the Organic Farming Scheme and capital schemes in support of the Agri-Food action plans.

## **TIR MYNYDD**

6. With the Rural Development Plan having cleared the last major hurdle, the way is clear for us to explain the details of the scheme to the farming community. Staff from the Agriculture Department Divisional Offices have already begun a series of open meetings throughout Wales with the farming unions and their members to take them through the detail of the scheme and to answer any questions about it.

7. Later this month, we will be sending every eligible farmer an Explanatory Guide on the scheme and a Claim Form. Completed claims have to be returned to the local Divisional Office no later than 6 December 2000.

## **ORGANIC FARMING SCHEME**

8. Last Saturday (7 October) at the Annual General Meeting of the Soil Association, I announced that the Organic Farming Scheme would open for applications on 1 November. In opening the scheme so soon after the approval of the RDP, we are well ahead of the rest of the UK. I also announced that I had secured an additional £2.28 million for the scheme for this financial year, an increase of 120% on the original allocation.

## **CUSTOMER SURVEY ACTION PLAN**

9. Earlier this summer, the National Assembly conducted a major survey to find out what farmers think of the service that the National assembly provides them on CAP grants and subsidies. Following this, we have drawn up an Action Plan, entitled *Translating the voice of Welsh Farming into action*. I launched this in Brecon on 4 October. This marks another important step in our drive to further improve the service the National Assembly provides to farmers in Wales.

10. The Action Plan takes account of the views expressed in the customer survey and sets out what action we intend to take to make improvements. The National Assembly has already made farmers lives easier by shortening and simplifying claim forms and providing Agenda 2000 workshops. We have now introduced records clinics (see below) to help farmers avoid the most commonly made mistakes in form filling. The Action Plan will be reviewed by the end of April 2001 and the results will be freely available.

## **RECORDS CLINICS**

11. A series of Records Clinics are being held throughout Wales this autumn to help farmers with any concerns they have over completing livestock records. This initiative is a direct response to farmer's

request for more help to understand the record keeping requirements of farm support schemes.

12. I attended the first clinic which was held at Brecon Market on Wednesday, 4 October. Further clinics will be held in the first two weeks of November at 23 venues across Wales. Experienced officers from the National Assembly's Agriculture Department will be on hand to help farmers on a one-to-one basis at the 23 venues selected throughout Wales. I hope farmers will avail themselves of this free facility which has the support of all the main farming organisations.

### **GM FIELD SCALE EVALUATION, FLINTSHIRE**

13. The public meeting to inform local residents of the issues surrounding the GM 'Field Scale Evaluation' at Sealand in Flintshire took place in Connah's Quay on the 14th September.

14. The meeting was chaired by Bob Macey, Head of Environment Division, and the panel consisted of representatives from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the independent researchers studying the trial, and from the biotechnology industry group, SCIMAC. The panel members each made a short presentation and then answered questions.

15. Turn out was not high, with 24 people turning up. We advertised the meeting in the local press and I wrote to the local authority and the community council. I suspect that the petrol crisis - at its height when the meeting took place - did not help matters. It is also the case that we have received few representations about the trial from the local area. Friends of the Earth Cymru managed to travel from Cardiff and I understand made a useful contribution to the discussion which lasted over 3 hours. The feedback from the meeting was that most people were grateful for the opportunity to air their views.

### **AGRI - FOOD STRATEGY**

16. In the past month, there have been a number of positive developments which highlight the progress in our strategy of supporting added value processing of Welsh agricultural products. I would like to draw the Committee's attention to three such projects:

- **BURGER MANUFACTURING COMPANY**

- On 15 September, I opened a new processing plant for The Burger Manufacturing Company in Builth Wells which received a £194,000 Processing and Marketing Grant from the National Assembly. This plant uses Welsh lamb and beef, to make lamb burgers and the like, adding value to our prime produce and providing employment within Rural Wales. This is a good example of the agri-food strategy in action because it adds value to lamb forequarters - a key recommendation of the Lamb and Beef Action Plan.

- **FIRST MEAL OF WELSH WELFARE FRIENDLY VEAL**

- On 27 September I attended the first meal using meat produced under the Veal Cymru project, which aims to utilise unwanted calves from dairy farms to develop a welfare friendly veal

industry. The success of this project will help Wales develop a successful veal industry both for the home and overseas markets and bring extra money for the farming community.

- **AERON VALLEY CHEESE**

- On 29 September, I opened a new £2.2 million investment in a cheese production and storage plant at Aeron Valley Cheese located in Lampeter. This important project, which was supported by grant aid from the National Assembly, will add value to locally produced milk and provide a secure market for 150 dairy farmers in West Wales. It is an outstanding example of the kind of development we want to encourage to help secure a viable future for Welsh agriculture.

## **BSE INQUIRY REPORT**

17. Pre-publication copies of the inquiry report by Lord Phillips have been received by senior officials. Its contents are being studied carefully and no comment will be made until after the Government has published the report and given its preliminary response. I understand that the Government intend to publish the report at an early opportunity once Parliament returns.

## **INTERNATIONAL RURAL DEVELOPMENT SUMMER SCHOOL**

18. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (UN/FAO) accepted our invitation earlier this year to hold its 13th International Rural Development Summer School in Wales and to subsequently launch the event in Lydstep, Pembrokeshire on 10th September. Organised by the UN/FAO, the summer school offers training in best practice, international exchanges, a sharing of experiences and study tours. Other recent host countries include Croatia, Spain, Scotland, and Greece. Themes vary within the framework of development for rural women and their families.

19. This year's event was the best ever attended bringing together 19 representatives from 14 countries across Europe, including Armenia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Latvia and Lithuania to consider "Networking and Partnership Building for Rural Development". The UN/FAO has expressed its sincere appreciation for the warm welcome and hospitality extended to the participants and for the excellent facilities provided. I am grateful to officials from the National Assembly, the Welsh Development Agency and SPARC for their work over recent months which ensured a very successful conference and an excellent platform from which to promote Wales.

## **WELSH MEAT COMPANY**

20. The directors of the Welsh Meat Company now consider that they have reached a sufficient number of farmer investors to take the proposals for the company forward. The company has written to all the farmers who have expressed an interest in transferring their investment to the new venture with an outline of the proposals and a series of meetings is to be held around the country to explain the proposals in greater detail. The first of these meetings took place last night (ie Tuesday 10 October) in Aberystwyth.