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## AN EXCERPT FROM 'SECURING FARMERS' RESILIENCE IN A CHANGING WORLD'

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Humanity is inherently resilient in the face of change. Sometimes it isn't easy, but survive we must, and farmers are no exception.

Farmers face unique pressures, however, as unlike any other business operation they are in practice tied to a specific location ("locationally fixed") and particularly vulnerable to shifts in weather patterns and climatic conditions. Consequently, farmers are well used to change. They are adaptable and may make repeated adjustments in their stock and land management, whether on a daily basis or over longer periods. Such characteristics and responses are almost universal.

If that is not challenging enough, for a farmer, business and home go hand in hand. So, while farming has often been explained or interpreted in terms of its physical resources base, its capacity to survive and thrive is contingent on the skills, know-how and labour a farmer and farm family provide.

The family farm structure that still predominates in the UK and many other western style economies and elsewhere is above all a social enterprise as well as a business. The business profitability or productivity of the family farm and its adaptability rests in large part on that inter-dependency between land, resources and people. Family farms have repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to adapt and survive due to their social structure.

Today it is the pace of change, rather than change per se that is cause for concern. The stresses on farmers, farm families and indeed on rural communities are starkly demonstrated across the UK.

Changes in recent decades include reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), adverse weather conditions, disease outbreaks and the prospect of future changes, most immediately with the prospect of Brexit, are putting continued, increased stress and pressure on farmers.

Stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression are already endemic in many farm households. Research by Rural Support (2016) identified over 60% of farmers as experiencing significant stress. Those in debt scored significantly higher in terms of poor mental health and well-being. In addition, 17% reported that they did not have anyone they could speak to about a mental health problem. Another 37% said they would be willing to speak only to a professional. Older people were less likely to seek help for themselves than younger people.

Poignantly, statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2018) show that almost one farmer a week in the UK dies by suicide. All such deaths are tragic and often have far-reaching consequences for the families, communities concerned.

Suicide, however, is only one indicator, if the most quoted, of the on-going pressures on farmers.

More fundamental are the inherent stresses common to farm life. These need to be examined, better understood and addressed if more suicides are to be averted, and the overall well-being of farmers, their families, and their communities, increased.

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## GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR AGRICULTURE

Governments across the world are responding to domestic and global issues in many ways but have varying resources to implement effective policies.

Climate change is an enormous challenge to agriculture and governments. Issues concerning the availability of clean water, productive soils, forests, wetlands and the biodiversity of the planet, all hinge in some part on the way we produce food and what we eat.

One-third of the world's population obtains its livelihood from agriculture, and agriculture and food is the world's largest business. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), state that almost 800 million people of the world population of seven billion, are chronically undernourished; at the same time, in 2014, 1.9 billion people are overweight, and of these, 600 million obese.

From the mid-1940s, the United Kingdom and many other European countries increased state support for agriculture. Through the application of science and technology, the development of advisory services, and increased subsidies, output dramatically increased. Such initiatives were driven in part by concerns over food security.

War in Europe dramatized the need for increased self-sufficiency. More recently the debate has shifted in favour of a reduction in government support. National food security has become of much less concern. Production subsidies are now under attack.

Although the global pattern varies, overall government priorities have shifted. For the most part, production subsidies have decreased (and threatened to further decrease). To some extent these have been replaced by other forms of support such as payment for environmental management and, as in Switzerland and Norway, for maintenance of agricultural landscapes for cultural and other reasons.

At the same time globally, the number of farms has decreased; average farm size has risen, and the political power of farmers has declined. All this has and continues to place stress on the farm community. Agriculture remains an essential source of income for many individuals and nations. As noted in 'Agriculture at a crossroads: Findings and recommendations for future farming', Foundation on Future Farming (2016), one-third of the economically active population still obtains its livelihood from agriculture. Yet, government perspectives on agricultural policy have fundamentally changed.

## SOCIAL LICENCE TO FARM

While there is a relative abundance of food in the world, severe distributional (and financial issues) persist. There are, in addition, recurrent – even persistent – crises in areas of war and instability and severe food shortages.

Overall, however, there is a greater disconnect than ever between consumers and farmers. Consumers are asking about where their food is coming from and how safe is it? At the same time, there is increased political and public awareness of environmental and other issues.

John Wilson, a beef farmer in Wisconsin USA, and interviewed as part of this study said, “Farmers need to rise to challenges, to tell our own stories, be pro-active in sharing information about our production practices, our values; farmers will experience more and more legislation that won’t be coming from a place of agronomy or science, it will be from politics. Farmers are and will be forced to change how we grow food if we don’t tell our stories and get the facts out.”

The current debate and policy shifts (and so pressure on farmers) go beyond ecological concerns and concerns over the quality of food, animal welfare, disease-free produce and the preservation of cultural landscapes. Subsidies or some other form of financial support for farmers are increasingly promoted and supported on such criteria.

As Martin Stein, a Norwegian sheep farmer explained, “We recognise the importance of our family farms. Tourism is very important both here and internationally. We are famous for our fjords and the landscapes along our coasts have been shaped by agriculture and rural communities, we need to continue to keep people in these areas and protect this landscape.”

Particularly in the EU, these multiple new policy concerns are redirecting subsidies and other support to farmers. This is commonly described as the ‘social licence to farm’. This reflects the shifting and growing demands on farmers and land managers that go well beyond the increased output of food.

In New Zealand, where the absence of farm subsidies is loudly championed, environmental demands (as well as issues of food safety and animal welfare) have increased in prominence. Issues of water quality are now a primary policy goal. Legislation on dairying has increased resulting in initiatives and demands for detailed land management plans. The current Government is now implementing a national plan to address erosion, water quality, and climate change with a commitment to plant one million hectares of land (much of it farmland) with one billion trees between now and 2027. This is all encompassed within the concept of ‘a social license to farm’.

## GLOBAL AND OTHER PRESSURES ON THE FARMING COMMUNITY

As described, 'a social license to farm' encompasses the decline in production subsidies with increasing and multiple, wider environmental and other concerns. This threatens the current structure of farming and is already driving changes across the agri-food industry and within individual rural communities. To many farmers these challenges pose increasing uncertainty and heighten their sense of vulnerability.

Among the most prominent challenges identified in all areas visited are:

- Climate change: - including changing weather patterns and increased extreme weather events
- Financial pressures: - indebtedness, market uncertainty and increased price volatility
- Growing social isolation: - smaller farm households, increased difficulties in accessing services (e.g. schools, hospitals) and attracting farm labour and new, young farmers
- An increasingly elderly farm population and an aging population in rural communities
- Stress and pressures increasing the risk of farm accidents
- (Often hidden) rural poverty and young people leaving rural areas

These changes and concerns are equally evident across the UK. Yet as elsewhere, they are shaped and compounded by a national or regional lens. In particular, close to home, this lens is currently shaped by:

- The potential implications of Brexit including market shifts, new trade arrangements, environmental controls and different subsidy regimes.
- Changes in tax reporting / HMRC reporting
- Farm family structures / one-person businesses; pressures on farm households from changing production practices
- Increased recognition of farmers as a high-risk group in terms of suicide, stress, poor mental health and wellbeing.

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## RESPONDING TO AND MANAGING CHANGE

Many of the challenges and pressures identified are well established and unlikely either to be rapidly diverted or to quickly disappear; many are complex and poorly understood. That is certainly the case with climate change but equally applies to Brexit. All this heightens the pressure on farmers as how best to respond and how best farm support agencies should assist. What issues can farmers themselves influence and help shape? What are the issues for which they need help? What can't be changed but must be addressed head on? Identifying issues on this basis allows non-influential issues to be parked and the focus placed over which they have some control. Effectively managing change hinges above all on the industry's human component, and it is with people that the capacity for resilience primarily depends. This places farm support organisations front and forward in assisting and guiding those who can be overwhelmed by the pace of changes and the pressures experienced, or who may still need information and help.