



Q & A WITH RICHARD BETTON, UPLAND FARMER IN NORTHUMBERLAND AND FCN REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Richard Betton is a first-generation tenant (Raby Estate) farmer. He farms with his wife Dodge 725 acres (298ha) of meadowland, rough grazing and moorland lying between 1450 and 2340 ft above sea level. The whole farm is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Area and Special Area for Conservation. The farm carries a hefted flock of 280 pedigree Swaledale ewes with 90 replacement hogs and a herd of Pedigree Aberdeen Angus suckler cows. Breeding sheep and finished lambs are sold as well as 18month AA stores and a few registered bulls. The poor grazing and restrictive environmental management restrictions are exacerbated by high rainfall and lead contamination from old mine workings.



Richard Betton

The year ahead.

The uncertainties of Brexit with half the wether lambs still on the farm is a serious cause for concern as is a recent £20 hike in concentrate prices and the shortage and price of bedding straw. If a trade deal is not done with the EU I would be very pessimistic about the year ahead and sheep prices next backend.

Main impact of new arrangements on our business.

The main problem is that there is not a new arrangement with sufficient details to be able to judge or plan for. Apart from the phasing out of direct payments (BPS) there are very few details on: Sustainable Farming Initiative, de-coupling, reducing regulation, ELM and the "Lump Sum". Current work on ELM seems to be totally detached from the practicalities of food production and driven by the worst excesses of Natural England especially in the context of semi-natural grassland with prescriptions that are as extreme as HLS or CS for a fraction of the payment. Unless there is a significant change, I fear for the future of high lying hill farms: environmental sustainability has to be under pinned by financial sustainability.

How are you approaching planning for the future?

I am fully plugged in to all the Defra consultation (regulation, ELM, Slurry management, Net Zero) as I want to try and ensure a future for hill farming and informed policy making. In our own case I have negotiated a relinquishment of my tenancy to take effect October 2022. I am 66 and have no successor. I am also trying to encourage my Landlord's agent to explore the possibilities of a transition to a new tenant starting a year before the end of the tenancy. I would like to take advantage of the Lump Sum but am loathed to do so if it leaves the farm stripped of the remaining direct support.

Information Sources:

I value the information from the NFU as being the most reliable. FarmWell provides lots of general guidance. Defra's information at the moment is just "bare bones" and subject to the spin that comes from free-market ideology and blithe ignoring of unintended consequences. 21st century Highland Clearance?

Advice to the anxious.

Make sure that the business is efficient as possible in relation to cost of production. Resist the allure of brightly painted metal work to reduce taxable income. Resist spending more than you need to get a productivity grant. Increasing savings would make sense. Invest in production by improving genetics and reducing cost of production. Make sure that a robust succession plan is in place (this means talking to all those involved in the business especially family!) Wellbeing critical: develop a hobby/interest disconnected from the farm business and devote sufficient time to it (good for retirement). Keep talking to friends and neighbours. If you are over 60 consider the benefits of a planned retirement when you are at the top of your game and not when health or circumstances enforce it.