

# Country Matters



## Chairman's Message

It has been quite an interesting time in politics for the last few months but in the countryside it has been little short of disaster.

In July many farms were under water; in August we had the Foot and Mouth outbreak followed by a further outbreak in mid-September then Bluetongue and then Bird flu. As a result our meat industry has been almost in meltdown because of the combination of movement restrictions and export bans. Thankfully most places are beginning to return to normal although the impact will last for years and some areas are still under restrictions. The Autumn sales period was massively disrupted costing producers well in excess of £100 million whilst the Government produced just £12.5 million.

Then came another body blow, confirmation that DEFRA will charge the industry £40 million a year for disease control. How much more can livestock farmers take? Behind this of course is the general shambles of DEFRA, if it was a school it would be classed as 'failing'. The Foot and Mouth outbreak was clearly caused by officials failing to understand what was happening at Pirbright and ignoring continuous warnings; now we hear they have already spent more than £50 million over their budget for administration this year.

Does anyone still need convincing of the need for a change?

Jim Paice MP,  
Chairman of crag  
Shadow Minister for Agriculture  
and Rural Affairs

## Foot and Mouth disease

Defra's negligent approach to biosecurity has been exposed by Shadow Agriculture Minister Jim Paice at a debate called by the Conservatives on the outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease. Opening the three hour debate, Mr Paice revealed how warnings about the substandard facilities and ageing drains were repeatedly ignored, and criticised Ministers for failing to take action.

Jim Paice said; "We know from the Government commissioned report by Professor Spratt that there were problems with the drains as far back as 2003 but Defra failed to make money available to upgrade them. The report also contains a letter dated 20 July 2004 setting out specifications for improvements to the drainage and referring to an unspecified quotation for the work. The reply from DEFRA simply said that the proposals would appear to meet DEFRA standards for the safe transfer of this waste. That letter was dated 2 August 2004. This does not sound like a Department who were unaware."

He continued; "What is really hypocritical is that if Pirbright had been a dairy farm or a shop selling food it would have been stopped immediately from continuing until the problems were put right."

In January this year the Director of Pirbright told Radio 4; "We're trying to deliver a Rolls Royce service for surveillance in the UK but in reality we're being funded more and more at a level of a Ford Cortina. Essentially we're flying by the seat of our pants." This could explain why over the last eighteen months there have been three incidents, all reported to Defra, where the virus was released in to the public sewer.



Jim Paice MP, Chairman of crag raises the problems at Pirbright in the House of Commons

At the start of the year repair work at Pirbright began. It has cost just £220,000 to fix the drains. If this had been made available sooner the outbreak which has cost taxpayers £32 million and the farming industry well over £100 million could have been avoided. To date no one at Defra has been made accountable for this latest fiasco and the compensation for farmers comes no way near to covering the cost incurred by the industry.

The Shadow Defra team led the debate on Foot and Mouth in October and were supported by a large number of backbench conservative MPs all concerned for their constituents and pressing the government for answers.



## Quality of Life - Conservatives point the way...

conservatives unveil a menu of policy ideas designed to improve the lives of countryside people. See inside...

## Cameron meets with industry representatives

David Cameron met with the former President of the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), David Fursdon and on a separate occasion the Chief Executive and President of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE).

Both organisations were able to discuss their campaigning and the issues of current political and social importance for their members. David Cameron commented; "After ten years of Labour Government, we have seen a reduction in rural services, a decline in rural traditions and a lack of affordable housing. We want local people to decide where local



housing goes allowing organic growth for rural settlements. Rural dwellers understand their needs and they should be the ones deciding on the solutions not Whitehall. We want a strong rural economy which encourages new business start-up, has low levels of crime and more opportunities for young people."

## News from Westminster

### Consultants flourish

Defra ministers have spent a staggering £290 million pounds on consultants last year and are now planning to slash £270 million from programmes dealing with climate change and the natural environment.

A total of £1.1 billion of Defra money has been handed out to advisors since 2002, three times the amount the Environment Agency spent on building flood defences last year, despite warnings of severe weather. Peter Ainsworth, the Shadow Environment Secretary, said: "This is a staggering sum of money which would be hard to justify even if Defra was functioning properly, but it isn't. While consultants are getting rich on taxpayers' money, Defra is failing farmers and rural communities."



### Bovine TB

Bovine TB has remained at the forefront of the political debate following Sir David King's announcement that badger culling should take place to stop the spread of the disease among cattle.

King, the Government's chief scientific advisor, has urged Ministers to take a decision on Bovine TB and has given his backing to a badger cull. We continue to believe that a package of measures is required which addresses both cattle to cattle transitions and the reservoir of infection in wildlife. The longer the government delay the worse the situation will become.

### Changes to capital gains tax

Jim Paice and Shadow Financial Secretary to the Treasury Mark Hoban met with the NFU and CLA recently to discuss the impact of recent changes to capital gains tax on farmers and landowners.

Many in the country will lose out as a consequence of the scrapping of taper relief and indexation and the Conservatives want to work with the industry to persuade Alistair Darling to back down. Mr Paice said: "Farmers are under siege from animal disease and will again receive their single farm payment much later than European counterparts. The last thing they need is to be clobbered by the Chancellor."

### Flood defences

According to the National Audit Office report in June 2007 only 61% of flood defences were in good condition.

The Conservatives welcomed the announcement for £800 million to be spent on flood defences by 2010/11 but asked that this is backed up with clearer lines of responsibility for surface water flooding, sufficient drainage in urban areas, especially in new developments, and better coordination between the various bodies involved at the time of floods.

### Bluetongue vaccine

The Shadow Defra team challenged the Government over the delays in tendering for a bluetongue vaccine which has now belatedly taken place.

Without a vaccine, before next year's midge season, it is unlikely the disease will be contained. Hillary Benn has assured the house a vaccine will be ready by the middle of next year, when the weather is warm and the midges flourishing. We will continue to update members on this progress.

### Counting the cost

Farmers may be charged for a service they now receive as a matter of course, according to an announcement in the Pre-Budget report.

Currently farmers are consulted, through stakeholder groups such as the NFU, on farming related issues for free but the new proposed system will charge farmers for consultation saving Defra £120 million over three years. Jim Paice commented; "The industry already carries most of the cost of disease whilst the Government fails to ensure the biosecurity of its own premises. Any further so-called cost sharing could only be considered if the industry has a real say in disease control policies and the Government puts its own house in order both on its premises and at our ports and airports."

### Team visits

On a visit to Pirbright Research Institute in November, Jim Paice learnt more about the Bluetongue vaccine, circumstances surrounding the Foot and Mouth outbreak, and biosecurity measures.

During the summer floods Peter Ainsworth visited Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury. Bill Wiggin MP got a bit too close to the action when his car became submerged in Herefordshire with him and his 3 year old daughter stuck inside. Thankfully both escaped without injury. Jim also met with Sir David King in December to listen to his opinions on Bovine TB control. The Shadow Defra Team visited over thirty agricultural shows this year.

## Quality of Life a menu of p

### Planning & housing

- All local authorities be strongly encouraged to facilitate Community Landscape Character in their new building design.
- That current policy encourages landowners to release their land for developments for local people. We would continue this but add a new form of part-ownership which will enable a wide range of organisations and individuals to build houses for part rent and part sale.
- Landowners seeking to redevelop redundant farm buildings or gain planning permission for non-agricultural uses might be encouraged to dedicate land for Localhold homes.

### Farm inspections

- One inspector to carry out work for all the necessary agencies at one time.

### Protecting your property

- Legislation to ensure trespassers and burglars no longer have any right to sue for damage done to them on other people's land or buildings as long as occupiers do not use unreasonable force.

### Transport

- Introduce demand responsive transport. School buses should be seen as public transport and where practical provide a mixed service.
- Rural bypasses should be considered if the area is not an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or National Park and meets a number of different criteria.

### Food security

- The UK needs a food and farming policy which fully acknowledges the importance and value of domestic production; otherwise, climate change, international insecurity, a growing world population with rising standards of living will make us increasingly vulnerable.



# Life – Policy ideas

## Rural services

- Encouraging local enterprises to save village shops, post offices or pubs, and where communities develop good ideas government should make it easier for such groups to access funding.

## Local food supply chain

- To help create a new streamline supply chain model to bring together customers and producers, so there's a one-stop shop for farms and food organisations. This would improve access to local food markets, understanding and communication, and thereby ensuring more efficient delivery.

## Cutting red tape

- We, together with representatives from farming organisations, would reconsider all current agricultural regulations and make them less time-consuming, more realistic, and better attuned to the circumstances in which they are implemented.

## Government departments & Agencies

- Agencies and departments to be run by people with rural insight. Policy making should therefore be drawn from rural expertise as well as other established sources of credible advice.

# NFU Farming Champion 2007 and crag campaigner

October proved both our best and worst month. The Farmer's Weekly Awards were a welcome escape from the TB problems on the farm.

After going clear for six months during which time the cows and calves grazed the river meadows, we unfortunately went down with TB again, the second time in 12 months after a gap of 4 years. Because we have a closed herd policy and no other cattle are moved onto the farm, our stock act as sentinels to the disease reservoir in the wildlife, in particular badgers. TB restrictions have increased our cost of production by 20p per kilo effectively wiping out any margin.

This time we had two reactors – a pedigree Blonde and a South Devon cow. Both have been slaughtered losing Valentine, one of our best breeding females (and her unborn 5 month calf), a photogenic catwalk queen, used in the brand image work for the new South West 'Casterbridge' beef brand. Developed by Blade Farming South West for Fairfax Meadow, Casterbridge beef is served in some of the finest 5\* restaurants across the South of England.

We tried everything this summer to prevent a TB breakdown taking a whole farm approach to animal husbandry and grazing management. Rigorous biosecurity measures have been in place for some time but we went the extra mile. We created a huge dung heap as a ready source of worms

Jilly Greed farms prime beef and arable on a 500 acre farm in Devon with her husband and son. She was awarded NFU Farming Champion on the Year at the 2007 Farmers Weekly Awards.



away from the river pastures to encourage badgers in the opposite direction. We under grazed the pastures and left silage ground uncut and long swards of grass to minimise badger digging and foraging for worms in cow pats.

The reality is that the Exe Valley in Devon is a TB disease hotspot, with an overpopulation of badgers, overwhelmed with infected groups and setts. The South West is the hardest hit part of

the UK. Devon is the worst county in the country with 18% (982) of all beef herds (5,456) under restriction between January to August this year, sparking fears another record could be set by the end of 2007.

TB is an economic blight penalising the tax payer and the producer, through shambolic prevarication after prevarication. At last there seems to be a realisation that we cannot go on placing restriction and cost on the industry without tackling the disease at source in both cattle and badgers. Chief scientific advisor Sir David King's report, the recent EFRA visit to Devon and the pioneering work of the National Beef Association South West and NFU South West, signal a new willingness to solve the problem at regional level together on farm. The South West's natural geographical boundaries will help minimise movement of badgers outside the hot spot management areas.

The time for action is now – to save a once mighty industry close to the brink.

# Twinning

Children from an inner city school in Birmingham will be learning about the annual cycle of farming and where their food comes from thanks to a twinning agreement initiated by crag Chairman Jim Paice. The twinning agreement, announced in Country Matters summer 2007, has been set up between Overbury Farms in West Worcestershire and Wychall Primary School.

Penelope Bossom, owner of Overbury Farm, said; "It is so important we make children aware of the origins of food if we are to tackle obesity and the growing divide between rural and urban life. The Year of Food and Farming is providing an opportunity to educate people about where the food they eat comes from so twinning a farm and school seemed like a logical idea."

The children have virtually visited Overbury using video castings sent directly from the farm office and in November they made their first of three visits.

Head teacher, Therese Allen was thrilled with the children's reaction on their first visit, she said; "Virtual visits have allowed the children to learn ahead of today's visit (19th November), they knew the sheep were now in lamb and the crops that had been sown. I was able to set them tasks using the web cam, internet, and today's visit. It is such a fantastic opportunity to make a difference in the lives of some children facing real difficulties."

The twinning agreement was an idea to welcome the launch of The Year of Food and Farming.



Children experiencing first hand the running of a farm

## What do you think?

Let us know your thoughts on our policy proposals...

### Contact crag:

Lisa Thomas, crag, c/o Jim Paice MP, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

Email: office@crag.me.uk



# Regional round-up

People across rural England and Wales were greeted by crag stands at agricultural and rural shows this year. Rain stopped play by cancelling several of the shows crag we due to attend, including the Game Fair, but spirits were not dampened as our regional chairmen and volunteers promoted crag and the Conservatives to show goers.

- The crag petition 'The Decline in Local Services' collected over 600 signatures at the Royal Show alone. West Midlands Regional Chairman, Emma Moffett said, "The response overall has been fantastic and we are definitely going again next year!"
- Other shows crag attended included the Royal Welsh, Gillingham and Shaftsbury Show, Hereford Fair, Monmouth Show, Garlic Festival (Isle of Wight), Usk Show, and the Hampshire Country Sports Show. Please contact crag if you would like to get involved in the 2008 shows.
- Jim Paice has continued to tour the country to engage in discussion with farmers, rural groups and country dwellers. He visited Inkberrow, Longdon Hall and Overbury in the West Midlands, Selby in Yorkshire, and South Molton and the 'Cornwall Festival of Food' in the South West.



## crag Half Day Conference

Monday 14th January 2007 from 12pm to 5pm in the Attlee Suite in Portcullis House Westminster London SW1A 0AA. Lunch provided.

### Speakers include;

- Oliver Letwin MP  
Chairman of the Party's Policy Review
- Bob Neill MP (Provisional)  
Shadow Housing Minister
- Alastair Burt MP  
Shadow Minister for Local Government and Regeneration

## Shadow Defra team



**Peter Ainsworth MP**  
Shadow Secretary for Defra



**Jim Paice MP**  
Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs



**Bill Wiggin MP**  
Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries



**Gregory Barker MP**  
Shadow Minister for the Environment



**Anne Mackintosh MP**  
Shadow Defra Minister

## Shadow Ministers (Lords)



**Lord Taylor of Holbeach**  
Shadow Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs



**Duke of Montrose**  
Shadow Whip for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

# Conference debate

The government have left farmers feeling isolated and abandoned, was the message director of 'The Lie of the Land' Molly Dineen told a packed audience at a crag meeting in Blackpool. During her time filming the documentary Molly, a self confessed townie, revealed the unglamorous truth about farming.

Molly commented; "Farming has sculpted our rural landscape. But in recent years the farming industry has been decimated by disease, development, legislation and the power of the supermarket chains. For Britain's farmers, and their animals, and ultimately for the landscape we claim to cherish, the consequences have been dire. Yet they seem to go largely unnoticed."

Farmers in the audience nodded and muttered in agreement as they watched an exert of the film depicting a way of life they understood but remained hidden from most. During one scene a resounding knowledgeable laughter erupted when a farm consultant read a lengthy, highly incoherent paragraph from the Single Farm Payment form. He summarised to the farmer; "Put simply, do you have any badgers on the farm?"

Director for the Centre for Rural Economy, Neil Ward received hard questioning from the audience. He argued that too few jobs in agriculture and increasing numbers in the service



Molly Dineen address the packed crag meeting in Blackpool

sector meant the time for treating agriculture as a stand alone industry was gone. He said;

"The government should focus less on supporting the farming industry through diversification grants, and more on a national planning policy to bring in diverse business growth in a variety of industries."

Molly seemed to speak for the room when she commented;

"We must support our farmers now and in the future. The truth is that land provides the material basis for the rural economy. People visit because of the powerful cultural meanings, the sense of place and history the British countryside gives us. The land did not become like this without farmers and it will not remain like it unless farming continues."

## How to get involved

**Contact your regional chairman** – Our regional chairmen organise meetings across the UK with various speakers including members of the Shadow Defra team, other Conservative MPs and industry and subject specialists. Contact crag to find out where and when they are taking place.

**Send us your letters** – If you have local issues and policy ideas let us know.

**Recruit your friends** – a thriving rural economy is a thriving countryside



**Lisa Thomas**  
crag administrator

### Contact crag:

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