

FRIGSE

Farming and Rural Issues Group

NFU Westminster, September 5th 2024

Today I was lucky enough to represent the Chichester District at the quarterly FRIGSE meeting where several groups including DEFRA and The NFU spoke on rural affairs. Here is a quick(ish) round-up of what we spoke about:

- Rural industries are struggling to be 'plugged in' to the electrical network. Locally if you are a business needing to access a higher voltage from the electricity network our local power companies are currently quoting the allocation of higher voltage power in 2030 and accepting the export of power to the grid by 2037. This is seriously affecting rural industry (such as vegetable packing etc) from growing and for them to be able to export extra power made from large solar installations and rural sustainable electricity generators. Rather frustratingly it seems there is in fact plenty of capacity within the network, however the allocations have already been sold wholesale to developments which often are not planned for the next 10-or-so years.
- [Blue tongue \(BTV\)](#) affects ruminants, sheep are the worst affected by this virus where cattle and goats can seem healthy despite having high levels of this virus. It is a very scary prospect for our local sheep farming especially who have hugely shaped large parts of our home. Parts of Europe have terrible problems with the virus which brings forth great concern that infected insects (predominantly midges) will (and are) being blown across the channel and the infection will spread through the UK. So far it has been seen in east of England, predominantly Norfolk and Suffolk with Kent having reporting far fewer cases. An emergency vaccine has been approved however it does not entirely prevent the virus, however does lessen its severity.
- An [NFU Survey](#) has shown Business confidence in farming is at an all-time-low with Arable showing the most pessimistic results.
- TB is still affecting the industry, with the south of England there is experimental badger vaccine program being run with great success, however in areas where culling was in action, it is still honoured until the vaccine has been proven successful and rolled out across the country. - *NB I learned a very interesting point that really, it's very easy to catch a badger, they have an all-encompassing love of peanuts...*
- Quite a large proportion our conversation was about abattoirs. Locally we have very few options with Tottingworth in East Sussex now being closed and Hatfield closing in the next 10 years to become a housing development. I was told Hatfield was only built to take up to 6 cattle a day, where as now on the run up to Christmas they peak at 60 a day. Abattoirs are closing for a variety of reasons including lack of succession, lack of skilled workers, protests and lack of profitability for the smaller scale businesses. Nevertheless, the question is, where will our small scale, sustainable farmers take their animals? Especially as the 'Big Business' abattoirs run by the likes of JBS (Moy Park) won't accept the more rare breed cattle, definitely want nothing with animals with *big horns* and are much too far away for emergency slaughter. Using further away abattoirs also increases the concerns about animal welfare along the journey. There is a real need to carve out more space for this vital food supply infrastructure otherwise we run the risk of having no animals left in the countryside. This will not be from

farmers not wishing to rase them, but because of their inability to take product to market. *(There is quite a lot more I could say on this subject so please do ask me any questions!)*

- There are concerns about loss of farmland to large scale reservoirs and wind/solar farms, however the biggest concern is the proposed 'New Towns' which we are starting to get wind where they will be situated. This affects the promise of UK farmers being able to produce at least 50% of the food used.
- Local Authorities have been encouraged to reassess their Green Belt land and Grey Belt land. Most grey belt land is now classed as Brownfield sites and have potential of being built on. Therefore NFU are pushing for a land-use framework to be developed along side the planning and infrastructure bill to help protect vital farmland.
- Nationally there has been a rise in Rural crimes, especially theft of farmers GPS as well as ATV and quad bikes and a rise in fly tipping. If like me you are an avid dog walker you may have noticed in our local area we have definitely seen a rise in people dumping the *odd basket* of grass cuttings and composts, this may not seem like much of an issue, but domestic green waste is known to kill animals, especially horses (of which there has been a case locally), it is also a very fast way of spreading non-native species and disease through woodland.
- Water is and always will be an issue until our current state of affairs is sorted out. While in the Uk we have no shortage of water, we have very little storage capacity. Reservoirs can be apart of the solution. Water only abstraction licences are asked for to help fill small farm and horticultural reservoirs which was suggested may help take pressure off the network in key places and reduce flooding (however, I suspect not quite as much as they may imagine) but will also reduce water hungry industries need to draw from the network in the summer. The EA advises for a pre-app to be made at the cost of £1000 which then takes 6 months to complete seriously holding up rural infrastructure development.

This really is only the highlights of what we spoke about, if you have any questions please feel free to email or call to find out more!