

CUMBRIA LOCAL AND FAIR

Farmers together

Much of the Fairtrade system is predicated on producer cooperation and associative ways of working. So too with farming in Cumbria.

Headline question:

What can Cumbrian farmers do to work more effectively together to make their futures more secure?

Context:

Cumbria has a lot of expertise in farmer cooperation and collaboration, with organisations such as Aspatria Farmers (formed 1870) and West Cumbria Farmers (formed 1911) being good examples of producer marketing cooperatives that continue today. In this period there have been many other informal examples of farmer cooperation still going on, helping to maintain livelihoods on what is some of the most difficult land to farm in England.

Within the past 10 years, new initiatives have been set up, some with public support to try to stimulate further collaboration. Whilst some have failed with valuable lessons learned, others continue, e.g. Plumgarths producer hub, Wool Clip, the Lakes Free Range Egg Company, the Farmer Network, Cumbria Federation of Commoners plus many smaller marketing groups.

Despite some successes, most would agree there is much more potential for cooperation/collaboration. This workshop will hear more about experience from Cumbria and overseas and explore what new initiatives are most relevant and how to take any good ideas forward.

The workshop will take the form of two short presentations at the start to stimulate thinking, followed by a structured discussion using the questions below.

Presentations:

A. Steve Dunning (First Milk) gave an overview of his experience of working with farmers.

- The Rough Fell marketing group was established to promote Cumbrian lamb to various markets as far away as London with moderate success.
- Orton Farmers' Market has been very successful with around 40 regular stall-holders running under the FARMA accreditation scheme.
- The Junction 38 meat processing plant was ambitious but not successful due to the large throughput of meat needed to make it viable and the slow cash-flow inherent with such operations.
- First Milk is a co-operative of dairy farmers that gives members 1p per litre extra over plc milk buyers, while also delivering other group-purchasing advantages from cement to oil.

Steve highlighted his view that adopting sustainable farming methods (including water

consumption in Cumbria!) would be vital to the long-term success of farming in the area.

B. Rob Donnelly (Traidcraft) then shared some of his insights from working with organised farmers in the developing world.

He explained that organising can bring many benefits including

- Increased prices for goods.
- Reduced costs through greater purchasing power.
- Better sharing of information, including market data and technical knowledge.
- Better access to training.
- Better access to and more favourable terms for credit.
- Better representation.

Rob identified the following factors that may contribute to the success or failure of organisations, with trust (between members, leaders and members, and buyers and the group) being particularly important but fragile.

Success	Failure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clear goals and benefits ▪ Good leadership ▪ Good systems, structures and management ▪ Optimum size (big enough to be an effective negotiator but not too big as to become unwieldy and undemocratic) ▪ A strong catalyst 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Free-riders” ▪ Abuse of leadership ▪ Internal conflicts ▪ Large size differences between members ▪ Inability to adapt to changing circumstances

Discussion:

1. *What aspects have the most potential to benefit most farmers - higher prices, reduced costs, public goods, and what are the barriers to overcome?*

Paul Harper then opened the discussion to the group, asking first **what** we wanted to do to secure the future of farming in the region.

The overall feeling was that we needed to take a holistic view that included:

- Making our farming practices sustainable in the long term, with low inputs of fuel, fertiliser and water. This should also reduce our carbon footprint.
- Trying to establish a minimum price for our produce.
- Creating a strong, recognisable brand to open up more markets. This should include an 'ethical' element that communicates responsible farming and quality produce.

2. *How can we achieve these benefits?*

i. *Work with existing?*

There was little appetite for a new accreditation scheme, as the current paperwork and legislation should provide all the provenance, environmental and animal welfare guarantees needed. Similarly, it was noted that there are already many representative groups, both at local

and national level, and creating another one probably wasn't a good idea. Also with branding, all seemed to agree that if something was done that it would need to be branded in some way, but there have been numerous marketing schemes in recent years within the county with varying success and uncertainty whether producers not currently involved in existing marketing schemes would get involved at a time when market prices are rising. However, the idea of using an existing organisation to explore the option of having an 'umbrella brand' with existing marketing groups in the county was popular, with the NFU, LDNP and the Farmer Network all keen to contribute, in principle.

ii. ***Start something new?*** See above

iii. ***What will be the key elements needed to get right?***

There was a suggestion that an effective way to make our systems more efficient was to reduce inputs and that this can be achieved through sharing experience, technical skills and knowledge. It was noted that there is a need to shift the farmers' mindset away from being insular and competitive and towards being more collaborative and co-operative.

There was some discussion about the need for a catalyst to drive these changes, which is perhaps not present at the moment as livestock and wool prices are both good and rising. Some arguments for pushing for a change now were:

- We should plan for the inevitable difficult times in the future now while the industry is healthy.
- The changing trends in global consumption will present a challenge in the future, but could be an opportunity if we organise ourselves now.
- The changing climate may force us towards low-input farming methods that we should start adopting now.
- The upcoming CAP reform may drastically reduce our subsidy payments and we should start preparing for that now.
- Rural communities are suffering due to shops and services closing, as well as young people moving away - a long-term plan for the farming industry might help to reverse this trend.

iv. ***How long will it take?*** Not answered

v. ***When do we need to start?*** As soon as possible to explore the level of interest at least.

3. ***Who will take forward proposals coming from this workshop, how and over what time span?***

It was agreed that any solution should be farmer led. Further, that The Farmer Network is well placed to bring together the various groups and bodies of farmers, as well as other rural agencies, to continue the discussion. The church offered to help in a mediation role between farmers and supermarkets, if that were needed.

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