

## **CUMBRIA LOCAL AND FAIR**

### **Adding Value to Local Wool**

*The Fairtrade system has enabled farmers all over the world to add value to their products, and many sheep farmers in Cumbria have been able to add considerable value to theirs by selling into special markets.*

#### **Headline question:**

***How can Cumbrian sheep-farmers best attract the highest income, and promote and add value to local wool?***

#### **Context:**

Wool has been a mainstay of the British economy since medieval times and is still an important sustainable material that can compete with synthetics and other fibres. Australia has, for some time, been the World's leading producer of wool and has left the British wool industry somewhat marginalised. However, the emergence of China as a major importer of farm produce is helping to revive the fortunes of British wool. Prices have been rising recently and are now at a 25 year high. Nonetheless, in some cases, the price paid to the farmer still barely covers the cost of clipping.

Farmers are obliged to sell their annual wool clip to the British Wool Marketing Board for a fixed price according to breed. The opportunity exists for exemptions and farmers are allowed to sell up to 4 individual fleeces to hand spinners.

In Cumbria, there are businesses and individuals using wool in carpets, garden compost, building insulation and a variety of artisan products. Hand knitting is undergoing a resurgence and there are many local, national and international initiatives to promote wool and its use, e.g. The Campaign for Wool, National Knitting Week, Eden Arts, Wools of Europe exhibition and Woolfest.

The traditional woollen mills of the West Riding have largely closed, but smaller processing plants now exist in Cornwall, Yorkshire and New Lanark. There is now a renewed interest in wool and Britain has the richest heritage in the world with over sixty breeds of sheep providing a great range of colours and other qualities.

#### **Presentations:**

##### **A. Steven Spencer (British Wool Board)**

- The Wool Board sells mainly to wool merchants for carpets, furnishings and clothing. It sells 28.5m kg of greasy wool per year and has 12 depots around UK. This has declined over the years as the wool clip has reduced.
- There are 22 wool auctions per year in Bradford selling around 1.5-1.7m kg per sale. The aim is to get best price for the producer. The price is now at a 25 year high, but still cheap. There used to be a fixed price from the government but synthetic fibres have got better to the detriment of wool. The Wool Board is hopeful that prices will increase further next year however the market is vulnerable to trouble in the EU. A lot of wool is imported to the UK and is often used for blending.

- The Wool Board was set up in 1950 and is the last surviving agricultural board. It helps small farmers to get their wool processed. Although it is a legal requirement to sell wool to the Wool Board, it is not government body, but a non-profit making farmers' cooperative. There are exemptions available that annually make up about 100,000 kg.

#### **B. Sue Blacker (The Natural Fibre Company, Cornwall)**

- We all need to make decisions to support natural fibres.
- Wool is now classed by some researchers/academics as unsustainable. We need to inform ourselves and counter those arguments.
- Sue had some key messages for the workshop:
- Expect to change - this is essential for the private sector
- Tell the truth
- Trust that things will happen and think long term
- Make things here – our carpet and suiting industries among the best in the world
- Do what is right for sheep
- Support the wool board
- Start small and local
- Be proud of what we do
- Get involved with the wool sack

#### **Discussion:**

John Barraclough from Wools of Cumbria said that Herdwick and Swaledale wools make better carpets than others. He has seen a huge amount of interest in natural products and things made in this country. Most of his sales are from the Wools of Cumbria website as carpet retailers are unlikely to be passionate about provenance.

The Wool Clip is a cooperative that has been going for 10 years. Every product must have a Cumbrian element to it. They organise Woolfest, which attracts 5,000 people from all over the world. There is huge interest in wool and sustainability is becoming a really important message.

A problem for producers is that exemptions are only granted for 2 years, which means that no long term business plan can be drawn up. Steven Spencer agreed to look into whether the Board could grant longer term exemptions, with an obligation on the producer to inform the Board of their intentions.

Getting wool to the depot is a cost – could we have a subsidised collection system?

The Wool Board is considering distributing availability of Herdwick wool throughout the year, rather than just 5 months. Businesses like Wools of Cumbria rely on having an even supply.

#### **1. To what extent are current marketing systems working for wool producers and what (if anything) needs changing?**

- People feel that wool board is doing a great job. Exemptions and distribution could be improved.
- The Wool board should get out and about more to feel more like us, not them.
- Could we have a blanket 5-10% exemption by area or increase the number of fleeces that can be sold from 4? Steven will take this recommendation back to the board

**2. How can wool producers produce the best quality wool?**

- Distribute leaflets on how to get the best quality fleeces and managing the clip better. "It takes a year to grow a fleece, but a couple of minutes to ruin it."
- We need to inform farmers that the Wool Board will pay a premium for better quality fleece.
- Producers can visit the Wool Board and see their wool being graded. We could organise this in small groups.
- The price going up means that people are starting to take more care.

**3. What can wool producers do to work more effectively together on joint wool ventures?**

- No more wool ventures. We should strengthen those that do and make them more accessible.

**4. How can we build better links between wool producers and consumers?**

- Education is really important
- Campaign for wool swing tags are really good

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

- i. Bring the Wools of Europe exhibition to Cumbria – Brockhole is happy to host it. This should be next summer for two months including the end of June. Funding will be needed.
- ii. Sheep producers' directory including all sheep products available in the region. Also a leaflet about wool.
- iii. Wear rare project. Can rare breed owners process their wool together?
- iv. High profile ad campaign run by the Wool Board. Could this come from taking a few per cent off the wool price with the aim of increasing prices next year?
- v. National Park – none of their uniforms are wool – could they be persuaded to wear wool jackets?
- vi. Feed into young designers
- vii. The Wool Marketing board will consider increasing their exemptions
- viii. We need to make it OUR Wool Marketing board
- ix. Support the Campaign for Wool
- x. Herdy will bring design led thinking to enable export

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