

Fact-finding trip to New Zealand strengthens NSA vision for future

By Joanne Briggs, NSA

Given the current situation with our planned exit from the EU, where the existing New Zealand import quota is just one of many things still left to fight over, and the likelihood of a new UK-NZ trade deal lies further ahead, there were all kinds of sensitivities about the Kiwis inviting the Brits over for a red meat fact-finding visit.

But with clear guidelines about what was up for discussion and what wasn't, the trip went ahead with considerable benefits to the UK group when we are at such a crossroads in our farming future.

It was an interesting mix, with 14 of us representing the UK red meat levy bodies and various farming and processing trade organisations, plus officials from Defra, the Department of Trade and Industry and the devolved nations. With both industry and government involved, including representatives from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, it was good for the UK delegation to spend time learning from each other as well as gathering information during the visit.



Hill country: Brothers William and Richard Morrison explain their farming operation near Palmerston North, North Island.

Having such a range of people allowed our New Zealand hosts to understand from the very beginning that there is still a lot to sort out on Brexit within the UK, with everything from trade

to regulation to be negotiated between the four nations, let alone on a wider stage.

With that in mind, the focus was on where the UK and NZ want their respective sheep sectors to be in 2030, rather than the immediate future. We both want thriving, profitable industries and many of the barriers to achieve that are similar for both countries – see section on 'Food for thought'. The situation is more complex in the UK, as leaving aside the trade issue, taking ourselves out of the EU farm support regime leaves us far more vulnerable than ever before.

Subsidy removal

New Zealand famously removed subsidies 'overnight' in the 1980s. As we heard frequently on the visit, the Kiwis are very proud of this and so confident that it was the making of their industry that they want everyone else to do the same. Given that they export nearly everything they produce, from kiwi fruit and wine to lamb and milk powder, it would be to their advantage to compete on a world stage where other countries no longer benefit from financial support. But take away their dislike of the market distorting influence of subsidies, and the NZ hatred of direct payments is far deeper. They like the fact their industry is now more streamlined and more market-focused.

New Zealand is far less regulated than the UK and immediate removal of direct payments here, without the



Moving stock: Sheep farmer Leon Black moving a mob of sheep on his farm near Invercargill, South Island.

associated removal of the costly red tape that binds every on-farm and processing activity, would decimate our industry and have far-reaching consequences for the economy, environment and society.

There would be tangible benefits from the UK moving closer to the NZ model for regulation but, with pressure from their own Government and environmental lobbyists to change, there is likely a happy compromise between the two. There is also a lot to

be learnt from what happened in New Zealand in the 1980s as, even if fewer business went broke than feared, red meat production is in the hands of far fewer farmers and scantily populated rural areas are struggling to maintain thriving communities with viable schools, services and infrastructures.

The bottom line is this – if the UK Government and general public want our countryside to look the way it does and values the role of small, family farms in delivering environmental stewardship, high animal welfare standards and active engagement in rural communities, it will have to pay for it. Be that via higher food prices or continued Government support, we have an awful lot to lose if the wrong decisions are made over the coming months.

But given that we find ourselves in a unique situation of being able to rewrite the EU rulebook for UK purposes, what can we take from the less regulated industry in New Zealand? We can learn from the attitude that stems from the very top level of Government that regulation needs to be outcome-based. There is no desire in NZ for the prescriptive type of legislation that is typical of the EU.

Farmer trust

An example on water quality, a hot topic for the Kiwis, is that the Government has decided against legislating specifically on fencing waterways and instead encourages farmers to pick what is relevant to their situation via a Sustainable Land Use initiative. It is an over-simplification to say the New Zealand Government 'trusts' its farmers more, but there is a lot to be said for giving farmers choice within schemes that prioritise activities relevant to a sector or region. If people share a decision, there is buy-in and less reason for them to try and 'beat the system' that is not of their making.

Whistle-stop tour

South Island

- Day 1: Presentations from Government and industry officials, plus a farm visit.
- Day 2: Two abattoir visits plus presentations from the processing sector.

North Island

- Day 3: Abattoir tour and a farm visit.
- Day 4: Attended Field Days (an agricultural show) to meet Government representatives and research experts.
- Day 5: Presentations from Government and industry officials.
- Day 6: Roundtable discussion with farmer and processing sector representatives.

No one is suggesting regulators, processors and farmers in New Zealand all get along all of the time, but there does seem to be less of a 'them-and-us' mentality. That is easier to achieve when you are joined by one common outcome (in the case of NZ, exporting product), but as the UK begins to step into the world as a trading nation without an EU security blanket, a New Zealand-style joined-up approach will be essential on things like effective cross-sector communication, prioritising new markets, maintaining existing markets, and managing the cost of compliance for export certificates.

Strong vision

This trip to New Zealand has highlighted several areas that NSA is already active in as it champions the interests of the UK sheep sector within Brexit. It is a long game, but it is positive to further strengthen our vision on where we want to get to for the UK sheep sector.



While the NZ domestic market is small, product innovation can be found on shop shelves.



Piled high: New Zealand lamb ready for export around the world.

Some food for thought

In this era of social media and alternative proteins, it is easy for consumers to feel guilty about eating lamb. Listen to the negative press and red meat is ruining the environment, causing animals to suffer, pumped full of antibiotics and likely to give you cancer.

As an industry, we need to constantly respond to negative, inflammatory comments with robust, science-based facts. We can confidently say legislation guarantees lamb is safe to eat, that it is an important part of a healthy, balanced diet, and that farmers adhere to high welfare and environmental standards. And continued research means we will hopefully be able to provide more information on the value of carbon sequestration of grass-based production.

Lamb is a niche product that, in terms of global trade, cannot and should not compete with cheaper proteins; we are not feeding the masses but providing a premium product for the people who want to eat, not the people who need to eat. If we can market lamb correctly to a world population that is growing in number and affluence, there

are opportunities for growth.

But this growth is in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and India, not within our traditional, comfortable markets of the UK and EU. The population of Europe is static, at best, and is similar to the USA in seeing a rise in the number of vegans, vegetarians and flexitarians. That is not to say that we should stop trying to counter the anti-meat eating lobby, but we should accept our consumers will be increasingly far flung around the world.

When you put a niche product like lamb on this global scale, the difficult question we have to ask ourselves is whether New Zealand should become an ally rather than a foe. Looking ahead further than the immediate Brexit bun-fight (which is not to belittle the paramount importance of the UK coming out of that in a positive position), can we find a way to stop competing with New Zealand for the relatively small (and potentially shrinking) space on UK supermarket shelves and align ourselves in the world market? These are not easy questions, but then, these are not easy times.