



**National Sheep Association**

**Phil Stocker, NSA Chief Executive. Report given to the NSA 2015 AGM**

I have to start by mentioning the current market conditions. It is immensely frustrating that lamb prices have been so low and unusual (maybe indicative of the times we are living in) that virtually all farm product prices are poor. It is even more perverse that in these times of more talk about the growing global population we are given signals to produce more, yet prices don't suggest for one moment that there are shortages. The reasons for the fall in prices have been well understood and well communicated – and, until very recently, most farmers were fairly accepting. But as we moved into more of a peak supply situation and NZ lamb continued to feature strongly on some retailers' shelves, and also the drop in farm gate prices appeared not to result in drops in consumer prices (that could stimulate more consumption), people have become more vocal. I have to mention #nolambweek. I can fully understand the frustration and anger felt but I don't think direct action such as this helps – the threat of it can help but we need to be very careful about alienating our market and it risks starving supply for many who are trying hard to sell lambs. I would prefer an eat lamb week rather than a no lamb week.



The NSA continues to do all we can. We can explain, we can embarrass and we can inspire – and we continue to do all these things. The worry, apart from obviously the worry of farmers' viability, is that the organisation gets side tracked and spends too much time working on things it can do little about rather than focussing on the things we can change. Referring to the market, I believe one of the big things we could and should do is to increase the domestic consumption of lamb as well as continue to open as many export opportunities as we can. On the domestic front it is of huge concern to see per capita consumption falling from an already low level (some 1.9kg per person per year) and also that it is an aging population that are the highest consumers. The ethnic community are strong consumers of course and I don't know where we would be without them, but again we cannot rest on our laurels and if these communities become more westernised then we should be aware of the impact on demand for lamb. We should encourage far more innovation in cutting and product development, and we should brand more in line with any other quality product. Treating a quality product as a commodity, or even referring to it as a commodity product, will devalue it.

At times like this it may not seem like it – but here are many opportunities ahead for us. In 2014 we produced, in partnership with the NFU, a 'Vision of the future of British Lamb Production'. This work identified many of the opportunities and outlined many of the challenges too. This work is all still very relevant and accurate and it was good to see it referred to in this week's Farmers Weekly. I also reminded Defra just last week that they



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should be referring to it when working on the Government's 25-year food and farming plan. We should not forget that we are a tiny island but are still 11<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of total



### A VISION FOR BRITISH LAMB PRODUCTION



flock, 4<sup>th</sup> in terms of sheep meat production and 3<sup>rd</sup> in terms of export volumes. Within the EU the UK is the largest and the most productive. There is no doubt that we are among the leaders of sheep producing nations, but there are plenty of challenges and plenty of obstacles to overcome if we are to get anywhere near our potential. Keeping sheep farming viable and on a business footing has to be our overall objective, because if we don't then the continuation of sheep farming will be on a different level and will not be the industry it is.

Volatility is the name of the game and, while it has been talked about for a while, it is with us right now. For farms to have strategies for coping with volatility is going to be crucial – whether that is removing ourselves from conventional market routes, becoming stronger stakeholders in the supply chain, working together to become more powerful, whether its

diversification, getting into energy production, structuring businesses to reduce fixed costs for some and to earn alternative income for others. The answer will be different for different businesses, but all need to be seeking answers if they want to survive.

The NSA is a UK charitable company that works to further the interests of the sheep farming community across the entire UK and beyond, and as such it needs clear objectives. Ours are about promoting and encouraging sheep health and, in addition, increasing understanding that good health management leads to improved productivity, efficiency and profitability. Also ensuring/communicating wider (but just as important) aspects such as the related environment and biodiversity, the role of sheep in rotational farming and soil health, the central role it plays in local rural economies, the contribution to tourism and culture. This list is long but still not easy to communicate or get across in a way that people understand. We talk a lot in agriculture of the need to educate the public. No one could disagree with this but sheep farming is a deep rooted activity and a bit of education is not the same as a proper connection and understanding. That's why we need to not just maintain but grow the number of people involved in farming/growing and food production, whether it's on a full time professional basis or on a part time/interest focussed level. We lose our agrarian roots more than we already have at our peril.

Here lies one of our biggest challenges – to convince the public and policy makers, and even other farmers, that sheep farming is a desirable and worthwhile activity. Constantly I hear challenges – the Government's 25-year plan, the AHWB, Natural England, the National Parks, even environmentalists who should know a lot better, and then George Monbiot and his rewilding and releasing Lynx crew. While we may think the findings of the Foresight report and the Government's objectives of sustainable intensification suit us well, others have a completely different agenda. At an extreme, there are plenty out there who feel a future of hydroponics, GM cropping, mega dairies and feed lots will mean we can have the best of both worlds and feed ourselves at the same time as rewilding the uplands as national parks. We have to continue to make the case and communicate that sheep farming is good – it is an effective way of turning grass and herbage into something we can eat and enjoy, and in doing so it sustains rotational farming in the lowlands, it creates and maintains grassland that are one of our most treasured and important habitats/landscapes, it creates the right conditions for wildlife and plants to flourish, it produces wool as one of the most natural and recyclable fibres, and it involves people.

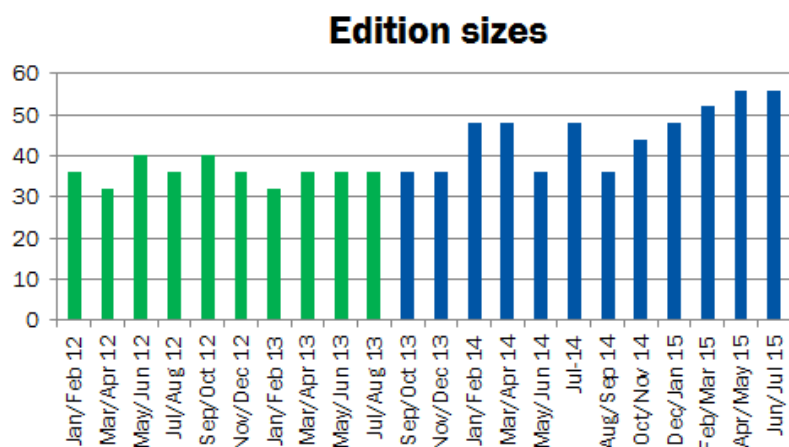
Our other big challenge relates directly to our charitable objective – that of sheep health. Poor health, disease outbreaks and parasite problems cause costs and losses, and both reduce profitability. Major disease outbreaks risk the closure of export trade and we know how that affects viability. So maintaining a high health status is crucial. The NSA invests heavily in supporting R&D and knowledge transfer into sheep health. Our link with Moredun is crucial in this, as is our close links with SCOPS, SHAWG and various animal health forums and research and education facilities around the UK. In addition we focus a large proportion of our resources into sheep health – from distributing the Moredun fact sheets, to our very successful sheep events, via our website, and of course the SF magazine.

To finish, I want to do something that I am always keen to do – recognise the contribution of so many people who help us in our work. The NSA works well in partnership with many organisations and working in this way draws on the strengths of different organisations, gives collective power and presents a sense of unity. Our NSA regions and all the many volunteers who help and work to support a wider cause also deserve a big mention – without them the NSA would not be what it is today. Finally the staff. We are fortunate to have a hugely committed and talented staff team for whom work is more than just a job.

**Joanne Briggs, NSA Communications Manager. Report given to the NSA 2015 AGM**

Phil has asked me to highlight some positive and innovative things NSA has done this year.

- **Sheep Farmer magazine.** It is now two years since we took Sheep Farmer in-house and this has been a real success story in terms of growing the magazine into more of an asset for members. The blue lines on the graph show that editions since we took the magazine on are generally larger in size, which means we have more space to provide good quality, independent, best practice and knowledge transfer information to members. We are very strict about ratios, with two-thirds of the magazine being editorial and one-third advertising, so the success Helen has had selling advertising has been the direct reason for large edition sizes.



- **NSA Next Generation.** This project has now been running for two years and, while the NSA Next Generation Ambassadors get a great deal of profile, there is a huge amount



of other activity that I wanted to share with you today. The Next Generation website is a huge asset, signposting young people to opportunities available to them in the sheep sector, and it is also the way that individuals can contact NSA to ask for help and support. They do this in great numbers and we answer all those email individually, tailoring the advice to the person who has contacted us, be it to ask for information, enquire about having a mentor in their area or want help finding a job or a work experience placement. The NSA

Lambing List, while primarily a service to our members wanting assistance at lambing time, is also an important part of the Next Generation project as we have many

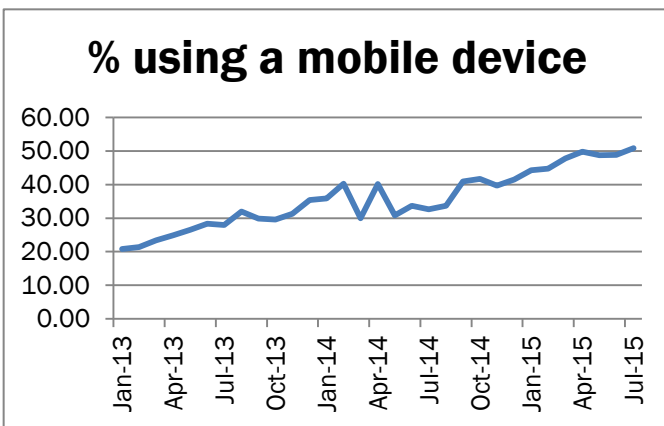
students (hopefully some of whom will become the large animal vets of the future) seeking experience via that route. NSA has a long history of supporting young people and a lot of NSA Next Generation activity – the Lambing List, the Young Shepherd of the Year competitions, NSA regions sponsoring young people to do to conferences and event – is not new. But by bringing it all under the Next Generation banner we strengthen our offering and make it clear that NSA is committed to the future.

- NSA sheep events.** The six regional sheep events this summer have been an overwhelming success with more than 25,000 people attending them all in total. I can claim no credit in delivering these and huge thanks goes to many people in this room and all the regional committees who have made them happen. Credit must also go to the regions who made the commitment of free entry for members to these events this year, which was a tremendous recruitment tool for NSA and show an incredible investment of these regions in the future of this organisation.



- Website.** Looking ahead now, and a planned investment this autumn is to make the

NSA website mobile responsive. This will mean the website will adapt itself in format according to the device it is being viewed on, be that a PC, tablet or smart phone. This is crucial, as even within the last two years we have seen a massive increase in the number of people viewing the website from a mobile device (see graph) will the figures for July showing (for the first time) just over half not using a tradition computer to access it.



Membership trends have also been very positive this year, reversing the trend of more cancellations in a year than new members, and seeing a move in the right direction for overall NSA membership. The left hand graph shows total membership per year and the right hand graph show new members (blue) against cancellations (red).

