

Thriving in an uncertain future for the International sheep meat trade

“The agricultural industry is facing an uncertain time with the sheep sector in particular having challenging times ahead.” These were the stark but honest words from John Fyall, NSA Scottish Region Chairman as he opened a seminar on the future of international sheep trade at the NSA Sheep Event on Wednesday 18th July at the Three Counties Showground. Chairing the seminar Mr Fyall said; *“Balancing supply and demand is a true test of Brexit in an international trade agreement”* and this was the general consensus around the busy seminar tent.

Joining Mr Fyall in the discussion was Robin Manning of the Defra Future Farming and Land Use team, Phil Bicknell of AHDB Market Intelligence and Mike Gooding, Director of Farmers Fresh, all of whom were in agreement that the sealing of deals in the immediate future were crucial to sustain the UK sheep industry moving forward, with policies, rules and schedules outlined from the offset.

Brexit involves change and challenge, however it also presents opportunities and following the event theme of thriving in an uncertain future, seminar attendees were encouraged by discussions that focused on preparing businesses for a positive future. Opportunities to evolve, to diversify and for the individual farm business to analyse their current situation were covered with AHDB updating attendees on their interactive Brexit impact calculator helping farms identify potentially challenging scenarios and enabling them to plan the way forward.

The seminar heard of positive, increased demand for sheep meat due to worldwide population growth. Phil Bicknell added: *“Demographics of class across the world are changing with more money to spend and China in particular is demanding higher quality meat. This increase in demand will require the quality of produce to improve. Of course, more work is required on market access but the UK, as the biggest sheepmeat producer in the EU, is well place to respond to this demand.”*

“The UK, having an industry with higher food safety and traceability provides a marketing edge over other countries who are unable to convey that to consumers. New Zealand is a competitive threat to the UK market but through understanding our own industry we can then establish what the market wants.”

Providing attendees with thoughts to take home for further consideration the seminar panel discussed potential changes that farmers may wish to consider securing a successful future for their businesses. All were in agreement the farmer must be open to innovative ideas, learning new skills and re learning existing ones. The use of data was seen as crucial to understand the efficiency of sheep farming business.

Suggestions were also made that questions from the consumer around odour, fattiness and colour need to be addressed. A domestic market governs and now might be the perfect time to reposition our product, reinventing sheepmeat as a healthy product and send a positive message to the consumers.

In conclusion the seminar panel addressed the audience by stating UK sheep farmers need to deliver what the customer is asking for and value what they want. Challenging times and uncertainty are ahead, but the general feeling is an air of positivity looking forward. The sheep sector is proud of their industry and Brexit must be considered to be creating an opening in promotion and marketing of our quality product.