

## THE FUTURE OF SCOTTISH AGRICULTURE: *A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT*

### CONSIDERATION OF CROFTING COMMISSION

The Crofting Commission welcomes the opportunity to consider the future of Scottish Agriculture and the vision that the government has set out. In so doing, it would be remiss of the Commission, as the body with a statutory function to promote the interests of crofting, to ignore the fact that crofting is only mentioned in one of the nine outcomes.

Crofting is mentioned in **Outcome 8** in the context of helping to sustain populations and amenities in fragile rural areas. It is arguable that it could hardly be ignored in this context when it is recognised that its less intensive agricultural system has done much more to achieve these outcomes than the more standard agricultural system that is the primary focus of this document. That stated, there is recognition of the divergence in terms of scale and output, but that should not justify the effective editing out of crofting from the future vision of agriculture.

Importantly, the accompanying discussion sheet asks the question as to what role marginally productive areas should play. This is an important question not just in the context of **Outcome 8**, but in the overall context of the discussion document. The suggested options are whether such areas should be regarded as contributors to the farming industry or as a provider of public goods and custodians of the environment? The separation appears to be artificial in that they are not mutually exclusive and are essentially interdependent. Staying with this outcome, it would be reasonable to expect the words crofter or crofting to appear in any of the identified next steps.

The above points are made to underline our unease at the approach being taken, which essentially marginalises an important component of agriculture such as the crofting counties which forms almost 30% of Scotland's landmass. We would suggest that the future of Scottish agriculture should respect diversity and all constituent elements and, in doing so, develop a more inclusive approach.

### The Vision

The Commission recognises the intent in the vision statement and considers that crofting makes a meaningful contribution to major elements such as a green and resilient agriculture that supports economic growth, the environment and communities. How grounded and realistic some of the subsequent outcomes are is perhaps debatable. We appreciate the positivity, but there is also a need for realism in terms of the current agricultural situation.

It is appreciated that the industry is considered the foundation of the Scottish food and drinks sector. However, the process is perceived to enforce a standardised and uniform approach to satisfy the retail sector, which is monopolised by large corporate supermarkets. The main criteria is continuity and conformity of supply which may not necessarily be met from Scottish production. In the recent debate on the state of Scottish agriculture in the Scottish Parliament, a member referred to there still being a power imbalance in the industry. It is that controlling influence that was being referred to. It is because of this, elements such as organic production and authentic environmental practices are of fringe interest and restricted influence.

It would also appear that the result of this controlling influence over production and retail is that the responsibility for risk rests with the producer. The avoidance of risk in the retail sector ensures that responsibility remains with the producer, which in turn makes it particularly difficult for the smaller producers. The result is a continuing trend to larger enterprises and the

reduction in the wider benefits that could result from a more balanced and integrated agricultural system. While there may be some tenuous recognition of this within **Outcome 2** and **Outcome 3**, it is not apparent that the scale is recognised or can be addressed. In that respect, while the statement in the future vision for **Outcome 3** that “*The whole agri-food supply chain is fair, transparent and resilient*” is commendable, its realisation may be remote if the root causes cannot be identified and addressed.

Tellingly a key fact advises that only 45% of agricultural output is processed in Scotland, while twice as many inputs are sourced by the food and drink sector from elsewhere in the UK. That mismatch may indicate that there are opportunities for development but also indicate that the infrastructure for marketing and matching production and supply outlets is not being provided in Scotland.

The lack of infrastructure such as local slaughtering facilities is one aspect that prevents the development of a more localised food chain. We would also consider that the risk transfer engendered by retail control and the influence brought by it on EU regulation has contributed to the loss and replacement of low throughput slaughterhouses in many areas. This has adverse consequences for revitalising local food marketing and outlets, and the range of benefits that can be derived from these.

## **Crofting**

The Crofting Commission considers that the crofting system is not simply a variant agricultural system. It also considers the system to be of importance in socio-economic and environmental and cultural terms, but that agriculture remains its core element. While it is primarily a small-scale, non-intensive system of land management, agriculture is a defining component. It is for that reason that the Commission takes exception to its almost total exclusion within this document.

Traditionally, crofting agriculture has focussed on the production of store livestock for finishing in more productive areas. In this respect it is part of the food supply chain and there have been significant efforts over recent decades to improve quality, as well as animal health and welfare. The government itself recognised the importance of this in the previous Ram Supply Scheme and continuing Bull Supply Scheme to crofting communities. Indeed, in recent years significant investment has been made in a modernised bull stud farm on the outskirts of Inverness. While it is arguable that this is on the margins, it has been recognised as part of the natural and pure qualities associated with Scottish produce.

Crofting is not detached from the decline in sheep production from the Highlands & Islands that has occurred markedly within the past 15 years. This phenomenon and potential consequences have been documented in studies such as *An Analysis of the Impact on the Natural Heritage of the Decline in Hill Farming in Scotland*, SNH, 2011; *Committee of Inquiry into the Future of Scotland’s Hill and Islands*, Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2008; *Farming’s retreat for the Hill*, SAC Rural Policy Centre, 2008.

A single excerpt from the most recent report on behalf of SNH highlights the scale of this:

*Livestock farming is also an integral part of the culture and history of rural Scotland, and is vital to the rural economy. The social cohesion of rural communities in the uplands of Scotland is also tightly bound to livestock farming. The changes in land management and livestock numbers that have taken place in the hills of Scotland in the last decade are perhaps the most significant for over 150 years. These changes will have a major impact on rural communities, as well as on the environment, landscape and biodiversity of the hills. Some of the impacts will be immediate, whilst others may take many years to come to light. Understanding how these changes will affect the natural environment is vital if key habitats and species are to be protected, and open landscapes maintained.*

The specific role of crofting agriculture in terms of maintaining the natural environment should not be underestimated. For instance, almost 70% of the land designated as National Nature Reserves and more than 60% of the land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest are located in the Crofting Counties. An indication of this scale is apparent when compared to an all Scotland level where 2% of the land area is designated for NNRs and 13% for SSSIs.

Land under crofting tenure comprises approximately 750,000 ha, almost  $\frac{2}{3}$  of which is defined as common grazings – primarily hill ground and moorland. Effective management of common grazings has assisted maintenance of large habitats, particularly machair, wetland and moorland, by supportive management. Common grazings are estimated to make up around 13% of the farmed land in Scotland and account for some 20% of Scotland's semi natural, High Nature Value, farmland. While common grazings form only 7% of Scotland's overall landmass, they account for 27% of the land under nature conservation designation. On this basis, crofting surely has the credentials to be seriously considered in the context of **Outcome 6: *Scotland is a world leader in green farming.*** However, that also requires recognition of the changing dynamics for crofting agriculture and management of these resources. Declining cropping on in-bye croft land and loss of grazing animals on the common grazings adversely impacts upon the environment and natural heritage. In this context there need to be more imaginative incentives to manage such areas. For instance, in other upland areas which have important designations there are management agreements with the graziers to ensure that the important environmental features are properly maintained.

To this extent there is a need to consider a more sustainable strategy for land management within the Highlands & Islands. It is our view that agriculture, which is an elemental part of crofting has an important role to play. That has to be aligned to environmental protection and enhancement, renewable energy development, carbon capture, tourism, afforestation, access and recreational activity. There is a need to combine that with better management of the crofting landscape, primarily through appropriate agricultural activity. In doing so, that will help to retain and sustain rural communities, contribute to the natural qualities of food supply at a primary level, and support local marketing and consumer outlets wherever possible.

The Crofting Commission has been provided with enforcement powers to ensure that crofters live on or within 32 kilometres of their crofts, and that they cultivate and maintain crofts and prevent them from being neglected by falling below GAEC standards. The legislation clearly indicates that there is an innate value in managing croft land, primarily in terms of agricultural standards. It appears contradictory, then to effectively ignore it in terms of overall agricultural analysis and development. Essentially crofting does not and cannot exist in a vacuum, and be detached from the wider consideration of agriculture within Scotland.

In summary, whilst the Commission does not claim that crofting is central to the future of Scottish agriculture, nor does it consider it to be simply a marginal addition. It has its own significance within what should be developed as a diverse and inclusive system. Recognition of this would assist the overall future of Scottish agriculture, rather than hinder it.

**Crofting Commission**  
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