

North Devon Harvest Notes 2016

My sincere thanks to all contributors for this year's notes – including Joanne Jones of the Farm Community Network, Andy Jerrard of the Rural Chaplaincy Service, the Devon NFU but most has come direct “from the horse's mouth” – my good friend who farms near Bideford and is always so willing to share the facts and figures of the harvest with me.

The weather this summer has been “catchy”. If we had been farming a hundred years ago there would have been little to no good hay made for the last two summers because of insufficient continuous dry weather. Good hay needs around 5 days of good dry weather – silage on the other hand needs only 2 to 3 and thankfully there have been plenty of this length of dry periods. The silage yield has been excellent this year, but figures suggest the quality may be below average due to the dry spell in early May after a wet and cold April which didn't allow the sugars to fully develop in the grass.

In fact, the rainfall over the past 12 months has been around 16% higher than the long term average, and was especially wet last winter. Some months have been 50% wetter – and January twice as wet as the long term average – but the rain came continuously rather than in great deluges so there was not excessive flooding.

There is a saying that if we have a dry May we do not have a full berry of corn – and that has been the case this year. May was indeed dry followed by a very wet June with July being the driest month of all. And indeed the crop yields of both wheat and barley have been patchy and down in some cases as a result of the weather patterns. Quality has however been good as the grain has been harvested dry and the need for on-farm grain drying has been small. The price for cereals is however quite low at present due to global over supply.

The winter rain affected the sheep farmers with the sheep treading the grass into the fields leaving none to eat so pasture needed to be supplemented with hay and corn and in some cases the sheep had to be brought in – all of which increases the cost of production.

Lambing occurs mainly between February and April – and this year the farmers with later lambing, particularly the hill farmers on Exmoor, did better. The sheep price has improved around 10% since the Brexit referendum largely due to the weaker pound as a great deal of our lamb is exported. Beef prices are up and down but are much improved at the moment - again due to currency movements.

The milk price has caused very significant hardship for many of our dairy farmers this past year, both here in north Devon – a high dairy farming area – and across the country. The price of milk varies dairy by dairy and with each particular contract. Some milk which is used in more specialist ways is paid a small premium per litre. But overall, the price obtained by farmers for milk is generally below the cost of production. Prices dropped from a high of around 32 to 33 pence per litre to around 17 to 20 pence per litre at the lowest for our area.

The low price is due to a global over production of milk but prices are beginning to creep up. The spot price of milk has recently risen to twice that of the wholesale prices – and though farmers are contracted at these wholesale prices – hopefully if this trend continues contract prices will increase. But the market remains very volatile indeed.

A significant drop in the production of milk is needed – but there has already been a decrease of around 10% in the past year. Production is likely to drop further – but it will not be easy to get back should the situation change and more milk be needed. There is also the continual question of food security and whether we want home grown or imported produce.

According to the NFU, with ongoing good biosecurity, and in areas where the wildlife TB reservoir is reduced, the number of farm reactors is reducing, but TB remains a massive issue for our dairy farmers. Once a farm has a reactor there is an immediate movement restriction placed on the farm and although farmers receive compensation for animals killed as a result of TB, the movement restrictions mean that milk production is severely interrupted as re-stocking of the herd cannot begin again until sixty days after all animals in the herd have tested clear. This can put an intolerable strain on farms' cash flow – with no milk produced there is no income. The distress of losing animals in a carefully developed herd is also heartbreaking. There remains considerable controversy about the methods that will best address the situation, which has been highlighted again recently as part of our area have been designated a badger cull area.

These days, as farmers have had to diversify their businesses in order to support their income, the harvest has also diversified. Many farms now offer accommodation for holiday makers to supplement income while others have turned to alternative crops. The use of the land for the production of renewable energy, with wind and solar power being the most popular, has offered some farms a financial lifeline. Mobile digesters are also now available for farmers to turn slurry into electricity. It is now possible for a farm's slurry to supply all the farm's electricity and heat the home and often supply back into the grid as well.

So even as we celebrate the harvest, we need to remember that many of our farmers are struggling at the present time with financial pressures and working isolation being the main contributory factors. This year, as well as the milk price and continuing hardship caused by TB, there have been serious delays in the single farm payment systems resulting in interruptions to cash flows with knock on effects to creditors and suppliers and in some cases issues with the bank.

The dairy farms that are surviving are either the larger farms where unit costs of production can be lower, those who produce milk to a particular quality – for example a high buttermilk, high protein content, or to a more exacting cleanliness level for longer shelf life, or those farms that are smaller but have been in the family for several generations and which employ no-one and have lower overheads – but there will not be high profits and families are likely to be dependent upon tax credits. Vouchers for Food Banks have even been needed in some instances.

Many farmers are surviving by reducing their incomes and working alone – but this can lead to increased working isolation. More and more farmers or their family members are working off farm just to retain a viable income – sometimes working in full time day occupations and running the farm by evening and night. Sometimes the farm house itself is sold as it can be expensive to keep up – but this can be heartbreaking for farmers for whom it may have been a family home for several generations.

Support is available for farmers through the NFU, the Farm Community Network and the Rural Chaplaincy Service (signposting information available if needed).

As we praise and thank God this harvest time for all his providence - the goodness and beauty of the land, the rain and sunshine, we also offer our great appreciation to all our farmers, “working flipping hard” as one of my contributors put it, to lovingly care for our land, and produce food for our bodies and our souls.

Rev'd Penny Dobbin

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