

Support to crofting agriculture

My writing in 2016 was taken up, to a larger extent than would have been hoped for, with the issues at the Crofting Commission. Whilst this was justified by it being a matter of great concern to crofters, there are other important things going on that need crofters' attention. With Brexit looming it is unclear how support to agriculture will pan out, but we are assured that we will have the equivalent of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) payments in place until 2020, so it is still very relevant.

You will remember that there was a lot of struggling to get a good deal for crofters in the negotiations leading up to the current phase of the CAP. Much to the SCF's chagrin, Scottish Government opted to go with a suggestion put forward by NFUS to have 3 payment regions. Croft land, which is mostly Region 2 and Region 3 rough grazing, was awarded €51 per hectare and €14 per hectare respectively, against €141 per hectare for the Region 1 better quality agricultural land. The embarrassingly small amount for R3 was going to be topped up with a sheep headage payment, it was fantasised. However, the sheep scheme was not capped so big sheep farms did very well out of it and crofters, on the whole, did not.

The incomprehensible intention is that by 2019 R2 will have nearly halved to €27 and R3 will have dwindled to a mere €9 per hectare, whilst farmers on the R1 better quality land will enjoy a payment rise to €161. Scottish Government claims that "the Basic Payment Scheme acts as a safety net for farmers and crofters". So even though farmers on high quality land would, one would suppose, have a better chance of earning a living, it is deemed that they need a bigger safety net paid for by the public purse.

A crucial element of CAP for much of Scotland, but especially for the crofting areas, is the Less Favoured Areas Support Scheme (LFASS). How it is mis-used in Scotland has been criticised by many, including the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the European Commission. Essentially the scheme has been worked to pay farmers on better land a higher rate per hectare, again. This was not the intention of the scheme, according to EU officials.

By 2018 LFASS is to be replaced by Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) which lays out, in a far more abuse-proof way, how public money can be used to prevent land abandonment in the areas of natural constraint. Already we have seen the 'industry' lobby manage to get the voluntary introduction of ANC any time after 2015 moved to the latest compulsory introduction in 2018, and we are now hearing rumblings from Scottish Government that it may not be introduced even then.

With such low Basic Payments, ANC is the big hope for the survival of crofting agriculture. This being a crucial issue, it is something that we must not be distracted from.