Leaving the hills forever?
No policy change spells the end for hill and island farming

THE CURRENT CONSULTATION on Less Favoured Area Support is one opportunity to address the current sharp decline in livestock keeping in the Highlands and Islands.

Latest figures from the SAC “Retreat from the Hills” report and from Government census data show an alarming increase in the rate at which sheep in particular are leaving the hills.

Sheep numbers in the Highland Council area have dropped by around 100,000 in the last three years, with much of this coming from Skye, Lochalsh and Lochaber. Argyll has seen declines of around 50,000 in the same period.

Although similar trends can be observed across other parts of the country, the Highlands and Islands rate of decline is significantly faster than in the rest of Scotland. Cattle numbers, although steadier, are also beginning to show a steeper decline, even in big cattle areas such as Orkney and Caithness.

Farming will disappear from the hills, islands and remote mainland areas unless something is done to address the dramatic decline in livestock. This was the stark message coming from representatives of the agricultural sector.

Continued on page 3

A really good gathering
Barra’s Jessie MacNeil, who helped organise the event, reports

OVER 70 DELEGATES gathered in Barra for the Scottish Crofting Foundation’s annual conference at the beginning of October.

Patrick Krause stated: “It was the best. Please pass on our thanks and good wishes to all who were involved in making it such a success.”

Voluntary Action Barra and Vatersay would like to thank Northbay, Castlebay and Vatersay Hall committees and staff, who all helped with the considerable catering for the events, those who were so willing to provide field trips for the delegates, the transport operators, the performers, the hotels and the island for giving the crofters such a warm welcome. To quote from one visitor: “I so enjoyed the days in Barra – I learned a lot, felt the warmth of the gathering as well as the dedication and commitment, and left for home inspired by all of you. Many thanks for all of this and more.”

SCF chair Neil MacLeod’s opening address called that the visit be a time of healing after a turbulent year when the organisation was faced by a small but determined band of critics “whose only aim was to destroy the SCF”.

The theme of the conference was “Crofting – Delivering the Goods”, looking at the reforms needed in crofting and related legislation to enable crofters to deliver public goods and to find markets for their produce. The Scottish Crofting Produce Mark was launched by the Minister for Crofting, Michael Russell MSP.

Croft produce was focussed on by specialists in the promotion of ethical, eco-friendly food, direct marketing, marketing a niche product and using the environment as a selling point.

Professor Mark Shucksmith spoke about the conclusions the Committee of Inquiry on Crofting. Michael Russell outlined what the Scottish Government intend to take forward from the ColoC report.

Mr Russell said it was time to move forward constructively. “I think there is a good will and support among the public of Scotland – we need to get up and get on with this process now,” he said. “If we have the sight of people tearing lumps out of each other then that good will might well be lost.”

Mark Shucksmith responded for the first time to the report’s critics. Read his response on page 9.

Full coverage on pages 8 & 9 of this issue.
Message from the chair...

As I pen these random thoughts on a balmy autumn late evening, I am reminded that the past few months have been anything but calm.

Since the publication of the Shucksmith report (and it was only a report) some of us were vilified and pilloried by a few individuals when we were gathering our members’ views to present to the Environment Minister. However, we feel we were able to form a balanced opinion in adequate time to inform the Minister.

I am grateful for the unreserved support and wise counsel that was afforded me by the directors and staff who carried out a listening exercise with patience and dignity. We have been very unfortunate that the Committee of Inquiry into crofting was disbanded on completion of the report leaving SCF to explain their findings. This was a costly, time-consuming period when more of our energies could have been concentrated on the raft of detail which crofting has become – blue tongue vaccination, EID, an equitable LFASS, the Scottish Crofting Mark, the proposed withdrawal of the bull scheme; so much requiring our attention.

Two absolute highlights for me. The gathering in Barra – the welcome and kindness we received from the islanders will long live in our memories, the presentations and speeches were so focussed, pertinent and timely that I was running out of superlatives to describe our guest speakers and animated workshop sessions. Our office staff deserve our heartfelt thanks for the organisation which was first rate, well done! Many people remarked on the harmony warmth of the gathering.

Terra Madre or Mother Earth – a bi-annual event held in Turin, Italy for small-scale producers – attracted over six thousand delegates from every corner of the globe. It was an enlightening and humbling experience to be part of it.

The kilted Norman and I manned the SCF stall with a colourful display of crofting produce, literature, enquiry forms, list of producers, samples and information on croft fod, Harris tweed and Shetland knitwear – all very well received. We were absolutely thrilled at the interest shown. It was a very hard but rewarding five days which I feel will bring its return, as we made many valuable contacts.

We were ably assisted by the indefatigable Pam Rodway from the Soil Association and Slow Food network, Maria Scholten, seed specialist from SAC, the Isle Ornsay crofters/musicians and the British Consul Trade and Industry. The interest evident in the numerous people who stopped to question, pick up literature and admire our goods augurs well for the producers we represented.

An abiding memory for me was of an Italian lady explaining to her family in the expansive way Italians do that the potatoes we had on display were genetically modified resulting in the different colours – Edzell Blues, Champagne, Shetland and other potatoes of different hues. When we explained that they were certainly not GM, but Scottish, we could have sold tons of them. Scottish oatcakes were also another huge attraction.

Harris tweed and Shetland knitwear, both intrinsic to crofting, drew many appreciative comments and enquiries. If I believed in reincarnation I would come back as a potato producer or baker! Beats weaving any day.

Now to let the tups out, always one of the highlights of the crofting year, the eternal hope that we will top the sale at Dalmally or Lockerbie! If only...

Season’s greetings to all our members

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find us on-line at www.crofting.org
Leaving the hills forever?

No policy change spells the end for hill and island farming

Continued from page 1

Speaking after the seminar, Norman Leask, past-president of the SCF, said that strong political leadership was now required. “We badly need some joined up thinking from Government here.” We’ve heard today about people leaving the land at an astonishing rate. It isn’t good enough to wait another five years for a change in policy in this mechanism which is designed to assist agriculture in the more disadvantaged areas.

“I’ll be continuing discussions with the European Commission on this in Brussels, but as a sector we all need to pay attention to this opportunity and have assistance from our politicians. We need evidence that the government is willing to support the multi-functional farming that we have in our area. We all know that we are making the most efficient use of the pastoral land that we have at our disposal, at really a very low level of public support, when you compare it to more favourable areas in the rest of the UK and Europe. We would like to see evidence that the Scottish Government – ministers and officials – understand that too.”

The consultation on the future of LFA support, available from the SCF website or online at www.scotland.gov.uk, closes on 19th December.

Continued from page 1

at a recent seminar in Inverness.

The seminar brought together crofters, farmers and local politicians from Argyll, Lochaber, Sutherland, Ross-shire, Shetland and Perthshire. Evidence, backing up the official figures, of the critical state of hill farming and crofting came from delegates right across the area.

Profitability is a real issue – figures from a recent SAC report presented to the seminar by Steven Thomson show an average loss of £626/head on a ewe in the LFA area and £280/head on suckler cows.

Most producers would prefer to make their income from the market, argued Robert MacDonald, a farmer from Grantown, but in more disadvantaged areas with higher costs, this is not always possible. Something needs to change in policy terms to help make those units profitable.

From Sutherland, Martin MacKay talked of the impact that the closing down of farming operations on a number of big estates and the consequent loss of jobs has had on the local community. 10,000 sheep have gone from the parish of Dumness alone in recent years.

Sylvia Armstrong, a haulier from Dornoch suggested that this loss was speeding up, with 650 ewes put out of this autumn within a twenty mile radius of her home and a big estate in the county finishing in agriculture recently after 200 years. Since the support structure changed, payments went to individuals who retired with it. Young people were keen to come in, she said, but with no support, it was very difficult for them to do so.

According to Argyll farmer Angus McFadyen, what the trends don’t show up is the loss of people from the land. He gave an example of a farming enterprise managed by two men, which was four farms thirty years ago, supporting four families.

These losses of store livestock have an impact right throughout the agricultural sector, according to John Gregor from Aberdeen and Northern Marts; and with increasing stock dispersals in Orkney and Caithness, finishers in Aberdeenshire are concerned about where they will get store stock from in the future.

The decline in livestock keeping makes it increasingly difficult for those who remain in farming, as marts, hauliers and other rural services start to disappear from an area and working livestock becomes harder with less people.

The seminar looked at the way in which Less Favoured Area payments could help stem these declines. Options for the future of LFA support, which aims to maintain low-intensity farming in disadvantaged areas, are currently being discussed in a Scottish Government consultation.

The possibility of maintaining the existing LFA scheme unchanged until 2013 – an option in the consultation – did not win favour with the audience, many of whom had travelled significant distances and given up a day’s work to express their concern over the loss of agriculture in the region.

Strong calls were made for support to be linked to activity and not paid to those doing nothing or leaving the industry.
The Angus MacRae Memorial Debate – a close result

This house believes that diverse localised food production is the only sustainable way to secure the food requirements of the world’s people.

John Bannister, co-ordinator of the debate, gives a brief account of this year’s contest

A CAPACITY house at this year’s gathering in Barra for the second in the series of three debates witnessed a spirited and skilful contest between two well-matched opponents.

Last year’s debate had been a great success and we wondered if this year’s could possibly match the standard set. The motion was drafted along the general theme of the gathering and eventually consensus on the wording was arrived at by the debate focus group.

Who would we invite to speak for and against the motion? Patrick Mulvany – chair of the UK Food Group and adviser to Practical Action Development Group – was an obvious choice and he readily agreed to take up the challenge to speak for the motion.

The difficulty then arose as to who we could find to be a suitable opponent. Our hopes were raised then dashed by certain high-profile individuals, whose initial agreement to speak had then evaporated for one reason or another. The search for a suitable personality eventually became exhausted and we simply had no opposition speaker; leaving us in a state of near desperation and the very real possibility that we should have to pull the plug on an event that many of us had been looking forward to.

This state of affairs remained unchanged as we gathered at the gathering. However, a flash of inspiration gave a glimmer of hope in the form of Gwyn Jones, former SAC advisor. Gwyn arrived at the gathering directly from his holiday in Spain so was totally unprepared for the task we not so gently put to him.

Some arm twisting and a dram or three was enough to persuade Gwyn that it really would be a good idea if he was to be the opposer. With a few minutes remaining before the start of the debate Gwyn hastily made his notes.

The debate opened with Patrick Mulvany predictably making a convincing and well-constructed argument. Gwyn countered with a more moderate view of the motion and injected some self-deprecating humour to support his opposition. Gwyn’s closing statement then also claimed defect in the wording of the motion whilst Patrick concluded his ‘final word’ by reinforcing his theme and rejecting the defect wording claim.

Edge of seats, collective holding of breath for the result of the vote, which eventually produced a defeat of the motion (31 against 21 votes).

This debate was yet again an enjoyable and thought-provoking exercise notwithstanding it was a close call.

Our thanks go to both contestants and especially to Gwyn without whom there would have been no debate.

Open letter to Michael Russell MSP

Dear Minister

Terra Madre

I have been moved to write you as I am returning from Terra Madre where I was part of the Scottish Crofting Foundation’s produce stand.

I did not go with much enthusiasm but to cut a very long story short various people took a variety of items, unimportant in themselves, such as old varieties of Scottish potatoes, Shetland cabbage (probably the most important vegetable ever grown for humanity – I will explain later), some Shetland knitwear, some Harris tweed, beremeal, oatmeal, a straw basket, the crofting brand’s new tartan, some leaflets on crofting life past and present, photos and a set of bagpipes.

This conglomeration created a tremendous interest in what we were and with my heart steadily lightening, Neil and I – with our beautiful and talented female helpers, maybe that was why our stall was so popular – were explaining the wonders of Scotland, its traditions and produce.

All of a sudden I was approached by a group of young academics from a European college. They said, “We have been studying your stand for some time; we can see no point in it. It seems to be a hodgepodge of unattached items.”

I went around to their side of the stall to make sense to them our thinking. I said, “Our stand is all about the people”.

People need grain and vegetables to feed themselves. Animals also need grain and vegetables so they can grow to feed the people. Tweed and knitwear give employment to people and keep them warm. The basket was a symbol of the ‘kishie’ and other types of basket required to make people’s burden easier. The leaflets showed how people in the past and present live on the periphery of Scotland. Music supplied by the pipes shows how the people entertained themselves. The new Crofting Foundation tartan shows how important people with no clan tartan are to the community.

As you see: it is ALL ABOUT THE PEOPLE.

I have come home very enthusiastic for the 2010 Terra Madre and must encourage the Scottish Government to get involved in any way possible in this fantastic showcase for Scotland and its produce.

Kind regards

Norman Leask
Past Chair, SCF

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ARRAN, BUTE. Greater and Little Cumbrae, Moray and the parts of Highland not already within the crofting counties are to be designated as new crofting areas. A Scottish Statutory Instrument proposing the extension of crofting areas will be laid before Parliament shortly.

The move follows a public consultation which gave resounding support for the plan and follows years of work by smallholders in Arran to rectify an historical anomaly. The SCF first held a public meeting there in January 2006 to outline the possibilities offered by the proposals on crofting reform. The Crofters Commission followed suit and explained the implications of crofting tenure for the island.

Speaking at the Highlands and Islands Convention, Environment Minister Michael Russell said: “Crofting has a real role to play in not only maintaining vibrant populations and thriving communities in Scotland’s less accessible areas, but enabling them to grow and prosper. We want to see inclusive and dynamic crofting communities and the designation of new crofting areas will aid the sustainable economic growth of these areas. We will now look at extending the Crofting Counties Agricultural Grants Scheme (CCAGS) to the whole of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Area to ensure crofters in the new area can fully benefit from this funding.”

Lochhead launches bluetongue vaccination campaign

A VACCINATION programme to immunise all susceptible farm livestock against the bluetongue virus was launched on 1st November by Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment.

Mr Lochhead said: “The bluetongue virus poses a real, potentially devastating, threat to the Scottish livestock sector. A whole-scale compulsory vaccination programme is the only way to properly protect our industry. While the compulsory approach will ensure that all farm animals are protected against bluetongue, it is only one line of defence. It remains vitally important that care is taken in sourcing stock and that high risk areas are avoided.”

Scotland is the only part of the UK to implement a compulsory vaccination programme of cattle and sheep.

The decision has been taken in partnership with the industry and will ensure that there is sufficient uptake of vaccine to prevent the spread of Bluetongue 8 in Scotland.

Half of the manufacturing costs of the vaccine (£2.6 million) has been paid by the Government for the first year of the vaccination programme.
a range of homes combining rural tradition, modern living and the latest technology to set a new standard in kit house design.
Balnakeil ewes – improved condition and milkiness with Harbro feed blocks

Harbro’s Super Energy 20% protein feedblocks play a crucial role in maintaining ewe condition in one of the most exposed hill sheep farms in the North of Scotland.

Andrew Elliot switched to Super Energy blocks five years ago on the 12,000 acres hill farm of Balnakeil at Cape Wrath and is delighted with the improvement in the condition and milkiness of his North Country Cheviot ewes.

“Balnakeil has the reputation of some of the harshest weather in Scotland,” says Andrew. “We don’t get much snow low down but the farm is exposed to constant gales and driving rain which means we need easily-fleshed sheep with tight skins.”

Super Energy blocks are made available from tupping time to hold ewes near the tups on the hill because, with open marches and few sheep on neighbouring farms, the tup-time gather can start five miles off Balnakeil’s own ground. Blocks are fed until the ewes are gathered off the hills prior to lambing in late April.

“The feed blocks are quite hard and last well,” says Andrew. “We put blocks out weekly and since switching to the Harbro block, there are usually a few bits left over each week when we go to replenish them. There was a noticeable improvement in ewe condition when we switched to this block, helping us usually achieve a lambing percentage of over 90% – as good as can be expected for such an extensive farm experiencing such harsh conditions.”

The farm stretches from the northern coast of Scotland about twelve miles inland and rises to almost 3000ft. The steading sits at the coast where there are around 900 acres which allows Balnakeil to winter the ewe hogs at home within 600 acres of sand dunes and also grow a few acres of turnips, to winter the tups, and silage, to feed the 45 Aberdeen-Angus cows.

The ewes are kept on four hirsels and the flock is virtually self-contained with home bred-tups kept for three years use at home and only one bought-in tup used annually on each hirsel to bring in new bloodlines.

The reputation of the Balnakeil cast ewes for shifting well goes before them and they meet a ready trade at the autumn sales, with last year’s consignment of 300 selling into Caithness and the North of England. Because of the harsh environment at this northerly farm, no gimmers are tupped and ewes are lambed for the first time as three-year-olds. Draft ewes are sold at six years of age after four crops of lambs and rear another two, and occasionally three, crops of lambs on kinder farms.

Balnakeil tups are sold at Lairg and Dingwall at four years old after being in the flock for three years and are eagerly sought after, peaking in 2006 with an average of £1950 for 12 at Lairg.

“Concentrates – a mix of oats, beet pulp and mineralised protein supplement – are only fed to tups as hoggs during their first winter and thereafter the tups are wintered on turnips,” says Andrew. “Rearing ruminants naturally on forage-based diets has a major impact on longevity and perhaps this is one of the reasons why many Balnakeil tups go on working to nine and ten years of age.”
THE PURPOSE of the conference in Barra was to try to chart a course towards recognition for crofters providing public goods. “Crofters deliver significant non-market goods,” explained Patrick Krause, “but if crofters can’t make a livelihood from delivering either market or non-market goods then they just won’t continue to do it.”

Pam Rodway, an organic farmer and cheesemaker from Morayshire, described the Slow Food Movement by contrasting it with fast food. It stands for food that is rooted in a particular place and held dear by a particular culture; food that gives a fair return to the people who grow and rear it.

Perthshire farmer Tom Gray describes his approach to farming as being closer to the crofting ethos than to agri-business. Despite being within a few miles of big livestock markets he chooses to rear cattle from the Western Isles. These are healthier, harder and more prolific than their mainland counterparts – plus the islands’ isolation from markets also isolates stock from diseases.

Crofting Minister Mike Russell offered little new information on the Government’s plans for crofting but robustly defended them against criticism from delegates. He said it was time to move forward constructively. “I think there is good will and support among the public of Scotland – we need to get up and get on with this process now.”

Nonetheless there was a good deal of concern among delegates at aspects of the Government’s response which changed some of Shucksmith’s proposals – notably the least of which was a lack of commitment to give greater financial support to crofting.

The Government’s proposals on crofting development have ignored Professor Shucksmith’s recommendation for this to be within a “powerful crofting and community development body” ideally within HIE. Instead it plans to drop crofting into the mainstream of HIE’s economic development work.

David Lamb from SAC said that research suggested a market for the kind of local food produced by crofters, with 44 per cent of UK consumers interested in buying locally and 30 per cent of tourists interested in eating local food on their holidays. The main motivators for buying local seem to be a desire to support communities and producers from that area.

Donald Murdie, SCF’s crofting resources programme manager, argued that with at least one-third of Scotland’s land mass in crofting areas and 25 per cent of agricultural land in those areas in crofting tenure, crofting land is a vast, but underused resource for crofters. Training and education will be an important part of the process of making sure more land is better used. Donald praised the work of two Uist folk, Mary Norton and Neil MacPherson, who set up and run a crofting module at the Sgoil Lionacleit as part of the national curriculum.

The hospitality at the gathering did Barra proud. Throughout the event the involvement of the local people, their talented musicians and their craic made this gathering very special. Fine local produce was served at every meal, showing what can be achieved on a croft in harsh condition.

During an evening celebration of crofting produce, Michael Russell MSP gave an inspirational address on what Scotland and crofting has to offer the world.

Our thanks to Iain MacKinnon for this report.

Laurent Vernet of QMS spoke on the value of a local brand. This is an edited version of his address.

CONSUMERS love brands, logos and marks, but unprocessed food producers and processors have been slow in adopting brand differentiation – especially with fresh meat.

Now the industry has caught up and every producer selling direct to the consumer has at least one brand. It is therefore important to get back to basics to understand what advantages and disadvantages branding has to offer.

A brand is a way of recognising a product within the mass market. Brand recognition can work for and against the product in question. If you have a bad experience with the product, you will not buy it again.

With a collective brand, you are only as strong as your weakest product. If someone has a bad experience with one single product from a collective mark, this consumer will often be resistant to trying other products associated with the mark. This is one reason why the specifications for Scotch Beef and Scotch Lamb are so important.

A brand is a promise, a moral contract between the producer and the consumer. Successful brands vehicle an ideology, a story and/or a guarantee. Depending on the message you adopt, your consumers may be very different.

The marketing buzz-word is local – but what is local meat? In Scotland, consumers understand local as Scottish but local is also often used to describe a product produced around 30 miles from the place of retail. Local is potentially a very dangerous marketing term especially in the context of the Highlands and Islands. For example, why should consumers pay more for a local product? “It’s local, so it was cheaper to deliver therefore it must be cheaper than in the shop.”

Local is more than just the locality or the distance of transport. Local is about an ethos. The product is from a reliable source; the consumer can talk directly to the producer. Local is about identifying exactly where the product was produced. Local is about the direct commitment of the producer to the consumers.

The term local is too often used in a restricted sense. Consumers interested in local products (and happy to pay for them) are not only looking for the place of production but they want a genuine link between the product and the place it has been produced which can be a flavour, a cultural character, a tradition or a specificity they won’t find in a general commodity product. I believe that local products from the crofting community have a genuine market beyond the 30 miles from where it has been produced. There are a lot of consumers in large cities who are happy to pay a little bit more (and often a lot more) to get a genuine food product. So think of the larger definition of local.
A synopsis of Professor Mark Shucksmith’s presentation at the Barra gathering

WANT TO EXPLAIN why the Committee of Inquiry into Crofting came to the proposals that we did, and why we believe they are right.

The committee engaged with over 2,000 people and gathered mountains of evidence. This is all available on our website, even down to photographs of the flip-charts from our public meetings, along with the written submissions and the analysis of the most comprehensive survey of crofter opinion ever conducted. Unfortunately, very little notice of this evidence has been taken in so many of the opinions voiced this summer.

One of the core principles of our report is local accountability, so let us look first at the evidence we gathered and published on this issue. In the survey of crofter opinion, people said the appropriate level for regulation to occur is: 46% local community level; 34% local area level; 16% local authority level; and only 21% national level – the level at which regulation currently operates. And ironically support for local crofting boards was highest in the north west Highlands!

Amongst 300 written submissions, four thought the Crofters Commission did a good job, but the remainder criticised the Commission or proposed changes. A recurring theme was that the composition of the CC should change to permit greater area representation and to be more accountable. Many called for democratically elected representatives, including local area delegates.

I am discouraged by those who say that crofters cannot be trusted to run their own affairs. The evidence is clear – most crofters do want more local control and accountability.

Turning to regulation, the other area where we have been accused of going against crofter opinion, the survey showed a strong desire to tackle absenteeism, neglect and sales.

When asked about these issues, of the 1,000 surveyed:

− 79% said absentee crofters should be forced to sub-let for a fixed term.
− 69% said absentee crofters should be forced to assign the croft.
− 88% said crofts should only be available to people who work the croft.
− 67% supported restrictions on sales or transfers; only 21% against
− 88% said crofts should only be available to people who work the croft.
− 69% said absentee crofters should be forced to assign the croft.
− 79% said absentee crofters should be forced to sub-let for a fixed term.

At most public meetings, groups felt there should be stronger measures to deal with neglect and absenteeism, and to prevent sales to the highest bidder.

Amongst written submissions, opinion was divided between those who favoured more regulatory powers – “every empty croft is a family opportunity denied” – and those who felt existing powers were adequate but needed to be applied more rigorously by the CC. Only a small minority believed that more regulation is inappropriate.

All this evidence is available on our website and it is rigorous and compelling. It gives the lie to those who say we didn’t reflect what crofters told us.

The Committee of Inquiry was established to gather evidence and to propose a vision for the future of crofting. Central to this is tackling neglect, absenteeism and land speculation; and that crofters themselves should take control. It is claimed now by some that crofters do not want responsibility and accountability and that they oppose measures to tackle these crucial issues, but you have seen the evidence that they very clearly did want these things last year. Have crofters’ opinions reversed since last year? Or are some people now shouting louder than others?

It’s tempting to take an ‘easy option’ – to go for what seems to be popular but fails to grasp the nettle – to leave the tough choices for another day – but we were told time and again that that will lead to the demise of crofting in only a few years. Radical reforms are needed which build on crofting’s history and traditions but meet the new challenges of the 21st Century. I am pleased that the Government is not taking the easy option but is prepared to grasp the nettle.

A major target for CAP support

AT THE SCF gathering in Barra, Gwyn Jones of the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism looked critically at the pros and cons of using the High Nature Value (HNV) farmland label as a selling point for crofting produce. Below we reproduce a summary of Gwyn’s talk.

HNV farmland is farmland which – because it is managed by low-intensity systems – supports rich biodiversity and is now a major target for CAP support.

Much of crofting agriculture falls squarely into this category. Though the traditional low-intensity use of the inbye (eg hayfields, arable cropping) may have changed for the worse in recent years, common grazings are almost wholly unimproved land. This semi-natural vegetation is a central characteristic of HNV farmland.

If crofters can make the HNV farmland label, properly defined, work for them then their main constraint – the low-yielding land – becomes their main asset.

However, many difficulties stand in their way. The main one is that a key characteristic of crofting land is the highly seasonal pattern of vegetation growth. Bringing stock to a finished condition on the growth of one season is very difficult, leaving the crofter with a difficult choice.

Selling store means that it is unlikely that a substantial part of the value added by the label falls to the crofter.

Using two or more seasons’ growth to finish a beast (eg selling wedders) means spreading the income over a greater length of time and developing a niche market for what is at present a mass market product – store lambs – produced in their millions.

The usual response – the use of concentrates for the final stage of indoor finishing – could, it might be argued, severely damage the integrity of the product. The beast ceases to be wholly grass-fed, while concentrates themselves are very energy-intensive and make the ‘good for the climate’ argument for local food sound rather hollow.

Nevertheless, the HNV idea chimes well with the Slow Food ethos and should resonate well with consumers – after all, it relates directly to the management of the land, not to a set of technical standards or abstract rules.

Gwyn finished by reminding the audience that reversing the current economic returns from traditional systems is a big challenge indeed. Marketing undoubtedly has a part to play, but even marketing won’t happen by accident – support and capacity building are essential.

Moreover, the encouragement of better market orientation and shorter production chains is very unlikely to be a substitute for the formulation and delivery of integrated support from both CAP pillars.

The geographical correlation between the post-decoupling reduction in sheep numbers, the distribution of semi-natural vegetation (ie HNV farmland) and the lowest levels of LFA payments is striking, pointing clearly to where such policy integration must start.
**Whole Farm Review Scheme re-launched to offer more support**

The Scottish Government re-launched the Whole Farm Review Scheme earlier this year in an effort to make it more attractive and encourage more farm businesses to apply. The re-launched scheme now offers increased grants, less paperwork and greater flexibility.

Open to all eligible farmers and crofters, it aims to allow you to take a fresh look at the entire farming/croft business and what can be done to help make it more sustainable over the coming years. This is done with the services of an accredited adviser* who will assess the business and provide a report and an action plan.

As the scheme’s grant rates are in excess of 80% and paid direct to the adviser business, the cost to the farmer/crofter is minimal. The grant is paid in three stages up to £2,400 towards the costs of improving the performance of the business: Stage 1, up to a maximum of £1,600 for the review report; Stage 2, up to £300 for a later follow-up review of the action plan and an optional third grant of up to £500 to support any additional specialist advice identified in the report.

The WFRs can provide:
- a simple application process, with approvals usually granted within three weeks
- very generous grant rates
- a stand-alone scheme that is not linked to any other Government scheme
- a review report that will assess recent performance (financial and environmental)
- an assessment of the farm’s key strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities
- the flexibility to cope with all types of farming situations and focus on the core issues and problems of that business
- an agreed action plan that will help the business to become more sustainable and improve profitably
- a return visit to review progress and provide any further advice
- an optional additional grant to obtain further specialist advice.

The scheme has assisted around 1,700 businesses and feedback analysis has been very encouraging. 96% of participants think the scheme is either “excellent” (50%) or “good”. At a time when Scottish agriculture is being increasingly market-led, now is probably an ideal opportunity to talk to an accredited adviser and discuss the best options for the future. The scheme is very flexible and can address many of the concerns associated with running a croft under trying conditions. Those may include profitability and loan issues, diversification restrictions, succession arrangements, pollution and environmental requirements.

John Doddie, policy manager for the scheme, stated: “Although the scheme was primarily designed to support full time farming businesses, a number of crofters have also taken part in the WFRS and found it to be a very worthwhile exercise”. He has also been encouraged by the number of participants who had taken the time to write into the office and praise the scheme: “I believe we have now got a very useful, in-depth appraisal of my farm business with clear directions for the future.”

“May I say that we are delighted with this review of our farm and I think it has been a very worthwhile exercise.”

“The fact that the review was being done forced me to think clearly about the future ... and has given me a much clearer path to what to do over the next five to 10 years.”

For more information and application leaflets, contact:

**Whole Farm Review Scheme**

**Why not take a fresh look at your Farming Business?**

This Scottish Government Scheme will refund over 80% (up to £1,900) of the cost of an accredited adviser. The adviser will analyse your whole farming business and provide a Report and Action Plan to improve performance.

Further information, Scheme booklet (WFR 1 (2008)), and application form available from:

- Any Scottish Government RPID local Area Office
- Scottish Government website – www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/agriculture
- tel. no. 0131-244-5236 or 6193
- Email: farmbass@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

*accredited advisers are registered under the Farm Business Adviser Accreditation Scheme for Scotland (FBAASS). (The scheme is run under contract by Lantra on behalf of the Scottish Government).
The last thing your children need when you’re gone is your bills

Call us on 0141 225 3233 or contact your local NFU Mutual agent for face to face advice on protection for you and your family

NFU Mutual Financial Consultants advise on NFU Mutual products and services and in special circumstances those of other providers

It’s an NFU Mutual understanding
Increasing croft incomes

The Crofting Resources Programme, launched at the SCF gathering in Barra, is a natural follow-up to the Sustainable Land Use Programme which concluded this year. The new programme will continue some of the themes of the old, but will pay particular attention to emerging policy issues on food production, land use, crofting reform and SRDP.

The Scottish Crofting Produce Mark, also launched in Barra, will form a key part of the programme. Its main aims – increasing crofters’ confidence in what they produce, encouraging production, finding new markets, getting a fair-trade price and increasing croft incomes – will be reflected throughout. The theme of developing and supporting producer groups and collaborative working will continue. Crofters who belong to producer groups will be well aware of their benefits. Such groups, covering sheep, cattle and vegetable production, now exist in many crofting areas from Shetland to Lochaber.

In Barra we highlighted as an example the success of Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers, who have given crofters in those islands a fair-trade alternative to store sales by securing a trading relationship with the_finished. The programme will assist crofters and crofting communities to make best use of the resources available to them in order to sustain the cultural heritage of crofting, its people and practices and the rich environment and cultural landscape derived from low-intensity crofting land use. We will continue to promote the productive and sustainable use of the phenomenal land resource that exists within crofting tenure. A network of facilitators will be built up who will assist individual crofters with access to SRDP measures and the programme will also assist townships who wish to follow the community development approach advocated in the Shucksmith Report. Maintaining and developing the skills base will continue and a mentoring scheme for new crofters will form part of the programme.

As with all the projects undertaken by SCF, there will be a need to secure funding if the Crofting Resources Programme is to go ahead. We have made various applications to fund the employment of one (full time equivalent) staff member as well as three part-time, outbased facilitators.

Gift Aid

It’s always nice to feel that you’re getting something back from the Inland Revenue and through the Gift Aid scheme you can help support the Scottish Crofting Foundation even more.

Sixty per cent of members have signed up to this scheme which increases the value of your donation by 28p in every £1. It doesn’t cost you an extra penny!

If you have received a Gift Aid postcard with this Crofter then you are not registered with us for our Gift Aid scheme. Please return this postcard to HQ. Even if you are not eligible please tick the box that states this to prevent further mailings.

And remember, it doesn’t cost you an extra penny!

SCF notelets

From well-known artist and Skye crofter Susan Walker’s image of a crofting scene, these attractive cards be used as Christmas cards, Christmas presents, or anytime note cards. The 4x6” cards come with envelopes in packs of ten at a cost of £5 including postage. Available by phoning HQ or via the SCF website, by purchasing these cards you are helping support our work and getting some unique custom-made cards.

Unique crofters’ tartan available to members

For a very special Christmas present this year, why not get your loved one something made in the unique crofters’ tartan.

Norman and Evelyn Leask in Shetland have set up an enterprise which makes the distinctive and exclusive tartan available directly to you and helps the SCF at the same time.

Part of the proceeds of all sales go to the Foundation to help the organisation further its work on behalf of crofters.

Including delivery to your door, the costs are as follows:

| Ties | £15 (£2.50 to SCF) |
| Scarves | £15 (£2.50 to SCF) |
| Rugs 54” x 72” | £60 (£10 to SCF) |
| Rugs 27” x 72” | £32 (£5 to SCF) |

16oz weight tartan is available at £46 per metre with £10 per metre going to the SCF. 10oz weight tartan available at £37 per metre with £7.50 per metre donated to the SCF.

A range of co-ordinating knitswear designed and produced by Evelyn is also available and again on all orders more than 10% will be donated to the SCF.

It’s not too late to order for Christmas, but this is also an opportunity to purchase something very special for any time of year. Talk to Evelyn at Anderson & Co, or any of her staff – 01595 693714.

Advertise your business on the SCF website

Self catering cottage to let? B&B? Do you run fishing trips or sell crafts?

If you have a tourist business then you can advertise on the SCF website. Look under Croft Holidays on www.crofting.org

Provide two photos, a brief description, grading (if you have one), contact details (name, phone, email and website). The cost will be £35 for the first year.

You must be an SCF member and the business must be run by yourself or an immediate family member on a working croft.

Contact HQ 01599 566365 for more details.