

The best investment we ever made

THIS YEAR marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Scottish Crofters Union, which became the SCF. The late Bob Cowan, chief executive of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (now HIE) said at the time that the start-up funding assistance they gave to the emerging union was one of the best investment they ever made.

Sceptics forecasted the early demise of the Crofters Union, but our organisation has defied them all.



Thirty years after the SCU was inaugurated at a meeting in Inverness in November 1985, crofters continue to have a strong dedicated voice fighting battles on their behalf. No other organisation does this.

No other organisation is run by crofters, for crofters. No other organisation represents crofters to the Scottish and UK governments, to the EU and internationally. No other organisation unites crofters across the Highlands and Islands and brings them together to protect and develop crofting, to sustain and strengthen our crofting communities for the future.

Damage to rural economies

AS FORECAST, due to the appalling weather conditions early in the year, we are now seeing the impact as livestock go to market.

In the crofting areas we are hearing of serious reductions in lamb numbers, calves down on

weight and "no bloom". With silage yields down by 50%, winter feed reserves are low and the demand is likely to force prices of bought-in fodder up.

So naturally crofters have looked at what stock numbers they can support over the winter

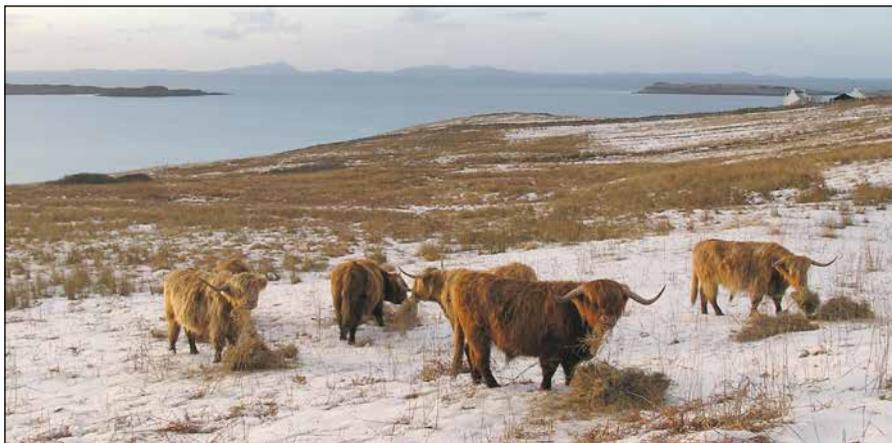
and are forced to make drastic decisions; the outcome being that herds and flocks are reduced, in some cases by 50%, including valuable breeding stock.

Scottish Government responded by saying that crofters simply have to make business decisions.

Under the Common Agriculture Policy, in order to provide cheap food, the system is based on income support to producers. So is referring to business decisions really fair advice from the officials who control the whole payments system, the system on which producers base their decisions?

As we have a subsidy-based system, it is the government who must also make a business decision for Scotland, a policy decision.

Does the Scottish Government business plan account for the consequences further down the production line when store animals or replacements are not to be found in the numbers needed? Does it accept the damage to rural economies that will be the result of the loss of livestock from the hills?



The three region debacle

LATELY, in several stakeholder groups, we heard government officials say "Producers have to make business decisions".

This seems to be the new mantra. In itself, it is stating the obvious, as this is exactly what crofters and farmers have been doing for generations, of course. But it comes as a response to crofters saying that the livestock system is broken, and if nothing is done animals will be put away in large numbers.

The problems stem from having three grossly inequitable payment regions. Even though the consultation on the CAP saw the vast majority of responses asking for two regions,

a bitter lobby from the large agri-businesses seemed to push the Scottish Government into announcing three regions. Extensive graziers on Region 3 land, which crofting common grazings are automatically allocated, are getting a mere £7 per hectare. And those on the best land, the arable Region 1 (the only region with no requirement for activity), get around £160 per hectare in income support. Is this a good commercial business model?

The notion that R3 payments would be topped up by a sheep headage scheme to somewhere around £25 is not working as, with such a poor flow of information as to whether

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