



NEWS RELEASE

Use: Immediate

Date: 09/10/2018

Crofting Cabinet Secretary upbeat on future at Federation event

The Scottish Crofting Federation was delighted that the Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy attended the Spirit of Crofting event in Rothes, Moray on Friday 5th October. Mr. Ewing gave an upbeat speech about the immediate outlook for crofting – despite the looming ‘bùrach’, as he called it, of Brexit.

“He reminded us at the outset about the extent to which crofters’ rights had to be fought for,” said SCF’s chair Russell Smith, “touching on the Battle of the Braes and the memorial to the returning servicemen’s struggle for land in Upper Coll, Lewis, that he visited recently. The years of struggle for land rights are still fresh in the minds of many in the Crofting Counties, and we must not forget this in reforming the legislation. But Mr Ewing was here to ‘celebrate that indomitable crofting spirit’ and the ‘commitment, passion, determination and fortitude shown by a very special community of people, unique to Scotland - the crofting community’.

“Mr. Ewing was very pleased that the Spirit of Crofting event was providing a showcase for young crofters and new entrants to the crofting scene and rightly highlighting some of the great business ideas that some of this fresh blood was bringing to both crofting and the Highlands and Islands. He emphasised that his team was working hard on a New Entrants Scheme for crofting, which would be a key element of the National Development Plan for Crofting that he assured the audience ‘would be introduced in the life of this current parliament’.”

Mr Smith continued, “The Croft House Grant Scheme was singled out by the Cabinet Secretary as an example of the government’s strong commitment to crofting, with extra money having been announced at SCF’s Gathering in 2017, improvements made to the scheme following input from SCF and more help now available to crofters thanks to the announced £4M Self-Build Loan Fund.

Attention was drawn to the extent to which the food and drink industry is a Scottish success story, of which crofting and the Highlands and Islands are crucial parts, as many of the producers highlighted by the Spirit of Crofting event show so persuasively.

“Mr. Ewing reiterated that he and the rest of the Scottish Government were in continuing intensive talks with their Westminster counterparts to get the best deal possible for Scottish agriculture. One of the highest priority areas was the safeguarding of the vital Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS) payments. He noted the former Deputy Prime Minister, Damian Green’s, remark that ‘Scots were determined to go to war over hill farm payments,’ and of course we are.”

Mr Smith added, “We feel a reluctance from Westminster to grasp that Scotland has a completely different agricultural system to England. Mr Ewing summed this up by saying that although Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Agriculture, was always extremely courteous in all his dealings, for now he would give Mr. Gove ‘very high marks for courtesy, but very low marks for delivery’.

“The progress being made on Crofting Law reform was also mentioned by Mr. Ewing,” Mr Smith continued. “He committed to a bill being brought before parliament before the end of this parliament, a bill that would ‘make simple, small changes, rather than substantial, more contentious changes’. Hopefully something that will make a tangible improvement to crofters’ lives.

“On the theme of legislation, the Cabinet Secretary also referred to ongoing progress towards a new planning bill, decrying the fact that in parts of the Crofting Counties whose tourist industries are currently booming, such as Oban, Skye, Lochalsh, it is almost impossible to get permission to build new houses.”

Mr Smith finished with reference to the Question & Answer session after Mr Ewing’s talk. “Mr. Ewing conceded that the recently closed New Entrants scheme would not be re-opened immediately, but reminded us of the work being done to introduce a comparable scheme in the not too distant future. He also made it clear that he was very aware of the already apparent problems with the escalating price of winter fodder, exacerbated by the disappearance of substantial volumes of distillery draff and pot ale from this market – diverted to ‘green energy’ markets. Because of this issue he had made loan payments for Basic Payment claimants, including the vast majority of crofters, available on the earliest possible date legally – starting on the very day he was speaking.

“A very pertinent issue was raised with the Cabinet Secretary,” said Mr Smith, “concerning the lack of abattoir facilities locally, especially for sheep and goats. If we are to access the niche-market of high quality, traceable meat it is essential to have local abattoirs that can take crofters’ stock, be it cattle, sheep, goats, whatever. Mr Ewing said that this is appreciated and would be looked into further by his officials. It needs to be soon, before it is too late for many crofting businesses”.

END

Contact:

Russell Smith, SCF Chair	01863 766 144 / 07899 896 001
Patrick Krause, SCF Chief Executive	07739 941 199
SCF Office	01599 530 005

Notes to editors

- A picture can be found at: <http://www.crofting.org>