NSA Scotland’s response to the UK Parliament Scottish Affairs Committee

After hosting two preliminary sessions on the Agriculture Bill, the Committee will be kicking off its main evidence sessions in the New Year. In this inquiry, the Committee will seek to investigate the following questions:

What should be the priorities of any future agricultural support system in Scotland?

The priority should be to maintain agricultural production at the current levels and avoid any further reduction in breeding livestock numbers. Critical mass is already being impacted which has ramifications for other parts of the food supply chain. As 85% of Scotland is designated as Less Favoured Area Status, the land is ideal for grass growth and its livestock farmers and crofters are renowned for producing high quality red meat from grass fed systems. This is recognised by consumers, is valued and supported through their purchase of Scotch PGI Lamb and other branding. The Scottish hill sector is vitally important as a source of breeding stock for Scottish, English and Welsh prime lamb producers. Maintaining production in these remote areas means directly maintaining people (sheep means people). Sheep production, particularly in remote areas, delivers so many other benefits through the way sheep are grazed and managed in the hills and uplands. Delivering social, economic and environmental benefits which in turn contribute a huge amount, both in terms of value and providing a scenic backdrop, for the Scottish tourism sector. 


Are the needs of the agricultural sector in Scotland different from the rest of the UK?

Yes, they are different for a number of reasons. In contrast to England 85% of Scotland is classed as Less Favoured area which is heavily dependent on support to keep sheep production active in many hill areas. Support is vital to keep active farming in these areas. Many parts of Scotland have seen sheep already exit from the hills, resulting in land abandonment. This results in poor environmental benefit with a significant impact on social and economic activity. Once this happens it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to put sheep back onto these areas as these flocks require to be hefted to the hill. With the stratified sheep system across the UK, the hills and uplands play a pivotal role in providing the maternal base for low ground sheep farmers so there would be a similar impact here.
Large parts of Scotland’s most productive hills and uplands have been planted in trees and with increasing tree planting targets set by Scottish government less grazing ground becomes available for sheep production. Although Scotland does need its own form of support payment, Scottish farmers also require access to cross UK trade without any disruption.

What funding will Scotland’s agricultural sector require post-Brexit?

Going forward, Scotland requires at a very minimum the total current budget of £580 million delivered though current schemes going forward. For years we have been one of the lowest paid regions in the EU as identified by the convergence money that should have been refunded to the Scottish Budget. It is time for that to change and allow for an injection of funding though a Scotland specific support scheme to allow farmers to invest in their business for the future.

What should future agricultural support in Scotland look like, and what goals should it seek to achieve?

Future support should be aimed at active farmers. Payments should go directly to the person who owns the animals and support should be tailored to allow farmers to invest and make improvements for their future. For years, in many hill and upland situations support has meant survival, this must change to allow our livestock industry to thrive in the future.

How should a future agricultural policy seek to accommodate different sectors of the farming community, especially those in remote and less favoured areas, and crofters?

All sectors of agriculture require a strong trading place to operate effectively. Scotland relies heavily on a stratified production system where a large number of lambs are produced in the hills and these producers rely on low ground farmers in the UK buying these lambs to finish. Resilient, important, genetics also flow from hill flocks down through the breeding chain to low ground flocks and these must be maintained to protect a large genetic pool. Support is therefore vital to protect our system of production and the jobs that are reliant on these animals throughout the production chain i.e. abattoir workers, livestock hauliers, auction markets etc.

What should be included in common frameworks between the UK and devolved administrations in relation to agriculture?
A common framework is important to avoid any trade distortion across borders within the UK. Sheep identification and traceability must be compatible across the UK. Disease surveillance must be on a UK basis although Scotland should have the ability to implement and be in control of its own Animal Health and Welfare budget and schemes. Any new framework must take into account the necessity that Scotland is generally at a disadvantage when producing goods, whether that be as a result of climate, distance from markets or grazing conditions. Scotland therefore will require specific support schemes targeted at maintaining sheep in the hills, a new scheme similar to the less favoured area support scheme (LFASS) will be essential in the future.

What balance should it strike between having a common UK-wide approach and providing flexibility to Scotland's needs?

Scotland needs the flexibility to develop its own support schemes. LFASS has played a vital role in protecting livestock production to the extent that in many hill situations LFASS support payments are more important than the Basic area payment.

What should be done to meet the long-term labour needs of Scotland’s agricultural sector?

Education is important here. School children need to have a much better understanding of how and where their food comes from. Children need to be educated in order to gain respect for how their food is produced and encouraged at a young age to see farming as a good career opportunity. Farmers need to have staff who have already had basic training, and preferably legislative qualifications, and local access to training courses whether in colleges or alternatives like Ringlink is essential. Farming must also become profitable creating an environment for young enthusiastic people to work in and be proud of the fact that they are producing food that both the UK and global consumer wants to buy.

What role can innovation & technology have in improving productivity in Scottish agriculture?

No farmer is against innovation and technology improvements for their own business. However, in most cases some form of financial assistance would encourage this to happen at a faster rate. Funding for improved livestock handling equipment, better access to hills, soil improvement and drainage would all allow our livestock industry to become more efficient and productive. It is also imperative that the Innovation and Technology developed is relevant and practical for busy farmers to be able to use with good backup support that has so far not always been the case.