

FOOD FIRST FOR AGRICULTURE SAYS THE FIRST MINISTER

“You are the original environmentalists” the First Minister told the NFUS conference on Friday 8 February, repeating the phrase of its President. The obvious follow up question is why is land use, predominantly agriculture, the largest single source of Greenhouse Gas emissions in our country? This cannot be denied as the scientifically validated statistics are abundantly clear.

The First Minister went on to say “mitigating climate change and protecting nature is increasingly important – not at the expense of producing our own food”.

Many will read this as business as usual with a 4 tiered system based on a single farm payment seemingly like the EU’s much criticised CAP. The Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill currently before the Scottish Parliament is the first opportunity to have dedicated Scottish legislation about agricultural land use in Scotland. But unless the Bill is substantially amended, as the Royal Society of Edinburgh argues in its response, the opportunity will be missed.

The First Minister also said that if unspecified inefficiencies and wasteful practices were removed the industry would be on track for the future. What are these practices? Is it leaving the soil exposed to loss by wind and/or rain by autumn and winter ploughing? ? Is it the many passes over fields with tractors during a crop rotation damaging soil structure and using non-renewal energy?

I hope the First Minister has visited the many farms around the country where innovative cropping and livestock regimes are in use. A new generation of farmers are forsaking the traditional approaches of their forefathers and demonstrating that profitable businesses producing high quality food combined with greater stewardship of environmental resources and reducing inputs is the new way forward. The bill needs to recognise this.

If the four tier system is to survive, at the least it must embrace environmental stewardship as a fundamental component in Tiers 1 and 2, given that these are to be the recipients of 79% of the resources. This is the only way to fully recognise the role of farmers in addressing the climate and nature emergencies

More fundamentally, the new system of agricultural support should be incentive based rather than activity based, producing public goods and services. Such an approach will produce a triple gain of quality food, improved management of the key natural capital asset of the soil and mitigate the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss.

To practice regenerative agriculture is not a choice between food production or environmental protection. Both are necessary to produce high quality food, and meet the challenges of climate and biodiversity.

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