

Spirit of unity at OFC 2010

8 January 2010

Over 500 delegates braved the sub-zero temperatures to attend what is being described as 'a momentous Oxford Farming Conference' by delegates.

For many attendees Hilary Benn's choice of words used to launch in 2030 Food Strategy plan constituted a 'new dawn' where agricultural production is the primary focus for farmland.

'Food was put very firmly at the top of the agenda in the Government's announcement of the new food strategy,' says Christine Tacon, the newly appointed Oxford Farming Conference Chairman. 'Mr Benn said that we need to produce more food and to do so sustainably.'

The Minister added that 'people power can help bring about a revolution in the way food is produced and sold, and that food business, including supermarkets and food manufacturers, would follow consumer demand for food that is local, healthy and has been produced with a smaller environmental footprint.'

One delegate, Lincolnshire farmer Matthew Naylor said: 'the Oxford Farming Conference is the best place to analyse the health and mood of UK agriculture and to understand the direction in which it is heading. The 2010 conference will be remembered as the dawn of a new age - the one where words began to be turned to action. A new spirit of unity is emerging between producers, politicians, scientists and NGOs and Oxford is the place where these alliances are formed.'

Commenting on the Oxford Union Debate, the motion 'This House believes that all farmers should retire at 60, Mr Naylor added: 'Although farming is as tough now as it has ever been, the increasing number of young delegates and the humour and insight displayed in the Oxford Debate demonstrate that the industry is still in a healthy shape. We should return to our farms feeling positive about the enormous challenges ahead.'

The conference organisers also announced two pieces of research undertaken to support the annual conference. The findings of the study identified that farmers, scientists, the food industry and the Government must work more closely if UK agriculture is to increase production while protecting the environment.

The OFC research was carried out in association with dairy nutrition company Volac and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. It consisted of a survey of 600 farmers by the National Farm Research Unit and the views of 10 technical specialists in the food industry gathered by the IGD.

The research highlighted that crop protection may have been seen as the most important past agricultural science advancement by farmers, but plant breeding was identified as the most important future production development, with GM technology seen as playing a significant role. Soil and water management techniques were also regarded as very important if farming is to be sustainable in the future. Prevention and control of animal diseases were also seen as key areas for research, as were animal genetics, nutrition and welfare.

Another strong theme for the 2010 Conference was succession planning. The Mercer family who have successfully engaged more than one generation actively in their farming business, took questions from the floor on how they had made it work. Communication, taking responsibility and a well defined strategy were identified as key.

Following the succession planning theme, at the light-hearted Oxford Union debate, delegates voted for the motion that 'all farmers should retire at 60'. The proposer of the motion, Barrister Joanne Moss, made it clear that the 'should retire' was an 'ideal' where circumstances allowed it to happen, for example where pensions were adequate and the successor was ready and able to take over the reins.