

I wasn't going to write about Brexit this month but you just can't escape it. The most recent proposals from the UK government Chequers away day appear to pledge that we will stick to the EU animal health and welfare standards (I say "appear" as we have to see the detail and then see if the proposals are agreed by parliament and then agreed by the EU – two big "ifs" but that is all we have to plan around). This is good news for our high welfare, high provenance, high nature value beef and lamb. No hormone pumped beef would be allowed to undercut our home reared product. And the Scotch Lamb and Scotch Beef brands should be protected.

There is also a consultation out from the Scottish Government which sets out questions and ideas for post Brexit policy "**Stability and Simplicity** proposals for a rural funding transition period". I urge you to read it and comment as the voice of crofters and hill farmers needs to be heard at least as loudly as the big farms of Aberdeenshire, Angus and the Lothians. New schemes must be "croft proofed" so that crofters get our fair share and aren't an afterthought to schemes designed for large scale agriculture. Common Grazings in particular need support so that they can be brought back into use.

Most worryingly, the consultation lays out the rules about the Less Favoured Areas Support Scheme which many of us depend on. It looks likely that LFASS in 2019 will be paid at a rate of 80% of the current level – a significant drop but one that most of us could cope with as part of the normal vagaries of farm income. However, if EU rules apply in 2020, then payments will have to be at 20% of current levels which, the consultation says "is unacceptable": it would tip many of us into the red and increase the rate of decline of stock on the hills. I recently travelled across Sutherland and saw hardly a sheep from Rosehall to Lochinver. So tell the Scottish Government what you want included – the Scottish Crofting Federation will certainly be responding to the consultation as part of our mission to support crofters and our communities.

A more immediate concern to crofters and hill farmers is the recent long dry spell – great for tourists but with lots of implications for stock. For the first time in the 20 years we have had the croft, I have had to cart water up to one of our apportionments as the burns and ditches dried up completely. The price of hay is up 20% on last year, if you can get it, and it remains to be seen if a second cut of silage is possible. Fields are looking like the Serengeti in the dry season, brown and bare, so we wait to see what effect that will have on the state of lambs by sale time and whether buyers will be out in force. Rain in the last week or so has helped but we will have to see what the next months bring.

I had the pleasure and honour of chairing the Alan MacRae Memorial debate this month as part of the Assynt Crofters 25th Anniversary Celebrations. It taught me two things: it is possible to achieve significant things if you stick at it with determination, intelligence and hard work; and that crofters love a good argument. Congratulations to them and good luck to all community buy outs.

Russell Smith, Chair – Scottish Crofting Federation

Northern Times 20th July 2018