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President Meurig Raymond Conference 2016 opening speech

My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great honour to be here and see so many members with us today for such an important conference.

I am pleased to welcome the Secretary of State and our many guests and I am sure the programme of speakers we have lined up will not disappoint you.

This is our biggest conference ever - the biggest farming conference in the UK and one of the biggest of its kind in Europe.

I should say thank you to our sponsors, and in particular Yara for yet again sponsoring the equipment enabling those in the top row of this very full auditorium to see and hear conference as well as they can.

I wish I could stand here today and say what a great place the industry is in.

I wish I could tell you how the coming months are going to see profit returning to the industry.

I wish I could report that we are on top of bovine TB and have the right tools to control plant disease.

I wish I could praise every retailer for sticking to their promises about backing British Farmers.

But I can't.

Because I am actually standing here before you at a most difficult time for farmers and growers.

We all know that global commodity prices in almost every sector are very low and unlikely to improve in the near future.

I have seen the devastating impact the recent weather has had on so many farms. No one can control the weather.

But these natural disasters have been compounded by problems which are utterly and completely man-made.

And it's these that I want to focus on.

Where better to start than with BPS!

Low prices have badly affected cash flow.

But for very many that has been made worse by the completely unacceptable delivery of Basic Payments in England and Wales.

By the end of January almost a quarter of recipients had still received nothing.

In my book that's nowhere near the "vast majority" that you, Secretary of State and Mark Grimshaw, had promised us.

In this market thousands of farm businesses and those supplying farmers rely on the BPS to help pay their bills... their rents or their mortgages.

In England today around 16,000 farms have still not had their payment.

Farmers with common grazing rights have not yet received a single penny.

Defra and the RPA have consistently refused to listen to our pleas for part payments- leaving many without any clue as to when they would receive their payment.

You can not run a business like that

Of course we've heard all the excuses for poor performance.

I'm not going to rehearse them here.

For me it's simple, Secretary of State,
This can't go on.

In 2016 the system has got to work.

And it's got to work well.

Within Wales BPS continues to be hugely divisive ..
as does the 15% modulation rate and how this is administered.

As we stand today, one in six farmers in Wales have still not been paid.

And in the middle of the BPS fiasco we have the retailers.

The rise of the discounters has left the others scrambling to regain lost market share and we're in a vicious price war.

The supermarkets may say one thing publicly... but we know that they will push the pain down onto their suppliers and they'll do it because they think they can.

That ends up with the ridiculously low prices for vegetables we saw in some stores over Christmas.

It was crazy that the carrots and sprouts for the Christmas dinner cost less than a can of Coke.

And, as if it were possible for things to get any worse, one of the most successful farm sectors in recent years, horticulture, will be hit with the National Living Wage.

It may be an admirable principle..

but it's been introduced without proper consultation.. without clear explanation and by politicians who have no understanding of how it's going to devastate Britain's fruit and vegetable growers leaving many unprofitable in as little as 3years.

We have a list of ways, Secretary of State, how the government can reduce the impact on growers and we expect you to take these on board.

Finally, to complete the list of man-made difficulties I have to mention the EU Referendum.

In this room there will be vastly different opinions.

Whatever your view is, there is no denying that this is a huge area of uncertainty for farming.

And if the vote is to leave the EU there will be at least another 2 years of uncertainty as new arrangements are negotiated.

We have allowed two hours tomorrow to debate this most important issue.

Of course I'm aware that so far my message has been one of almost unrelenting gloom.

I don't wish to be pessimistic.

I believe that in the longer term farming's prospects are much brighter.

Our own surveys of our members show short-term confidence has taken a knock ... but longer term confidence has held up much better.

But, my concern is that many farmers and growers will not survive to see the long term.

What I can tell you – and we all know – is that at tough times we need a tough representative body.

When our farming businesses are battered by storms, global markets, an unfair supply chain and disease threats, we need an organisation which will stand with us, lobby for us, represent us and an organisation which will offer the hands on support to get us through it.

And be there with us...through thick and thin.

And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, is why we need a strong NFU now more than ever.

And we do have a strong NFU!

We have a lobbying organisation that most other sectors can only dream about.

Thanks to the wisdom of our predecessors we have hugely valuable assets and a balance sheet which others envy.

Our close ties with the NFU Mutual give us a unique local network and a valuable contribution to our budget.

Our strong financial position has allowed us to invest in stronger connection with our members through 34 County Advisers.

We have a dedicated professional staff that I would not swap with anyone.

A call centre that spoke to over 30 thousand members last year alone.

We have an award winning communications team with huge reach who have galvanised the public to Back British Farming.

Who but the NFU could have run the Back British Farming campaign?

And we have a Brussels office where we take the message about farming to the heart of Europe.

As an NFU member you benefit from all of this.

I want to highlight a few of the NFU's achievements now...

Look at the number of legal cases we have taken both on behalf of individuals and for the industry as a whole.

No one else has the capacity to do this.

To take one example- the case we won against a local authority when flood water was deliberately pumped into a farmer's carrot field in Yorkshire.

That case was supported by our NFU Legal Assistance Scheme and the NFU Mutual legal insurance.

It established the vital precedent that Local Authorities are responsible...and must pay compensation... even if it wasn't them who physically flooded the field.

Look at what we've achieved in making the food chain more honest.

This has really been a long haul.

The NFU first pushed for a voluntary grocery code, then a statutory code, then an adjudicator, then the power to fine.

All this has happened because the NFU persevered and pushed hard.

It's been a long and difficult journey.

But now Christine Tacon has shown her mettle with a devastating report on Tesco's conduct.

This isn't the end of the road.

Too often changes are made to supply contracts at short notice – it is scandalous that farmers are so often the last to know - and the first to pay - when this happens.

At the last election we asked for the powers of the adjudicator to be extended, and all the main parties agreed.

Now, Secretary of State, it is the time for the government to deliver.

The code must extend across the supply chain.

And the adjudicator should oversee other voluntary codes- like the ones on dairy contracts and red meat specification.

And look at what we have done on bovine TB.

Secretary of State, I salute what you and your predecessor have done to establish an eradication strategy and to get culling onto the agenda and off the ground.

But this has been a partnership between government and the NFU.

Without the NFU, culling would simply not have happened.

We helped devise it,
we helped communicate it,
we helped implement it.

And we defended it in court.

But let me be very clear, the NFU may have galvanised action but the people we should really thank are those on the ground in Somerset, Gloucestershire and, this year Dorset for making the 2015 programme safe, humane and effective.

You are the true heroes of the farming community.

On behalf of all livestock farmers
Thank you.

Let us now build on that success.

We know that up to 28 further areas have registered an interest in operating a cull in areas of England where TB is rife..

So let us see a wider roll-out .. and let's see it this year.

The NFU is already helping a number of areas to prepare.

And next year let's move away from isolated pockets, let's see culling across wide swathes of our most infected areas.

Within Wales, TB remains the greatest threat to the cattle industry and latest figures show there has been a 25% increase in the number of cattle slaughtered due to bovine TB.

The recent badger vaccination project has now been cancelled – but badger vaccination in a TB endemic area of Wales was never going to eradicate the disease.

The Welsh government must now realise that no eradication plan is worth the paper it's written on without an acceptance that the disease must be eradicated from wildlife as well as from cattle.

Alongside the impact of TB which is devastating to so many farming families a further disaster has affected us in the past year in the form of flood water.

Many farmers have also suffered badly from floods, some not for the first time.

My sympathies go out to them.

I welcome the assistance that the government has provided and I welcome that you, Secretary of State, have taken a personal interest in the recovery effort and agreed with our long held view that farmers and landowners must be empowered to do more to help themselves.

There has been some predictable nonsense from the enemies of productive farming- who would like to blame everything on farmers, or sheep, or dredging.

As though the purpose of rivers and ditches was not to drain water!
Farmland is valuable, it produces food for the nation.

It powers the rural economy.

Farmers look after their land.

All we ask is that others recognise its value and don't just see it as a convenient temporary water storage.

Farmers who I speak to want to produce food and enhance the environment and they can do both as we all know.

However, current agri-environmental schemes in England are - I'm sorry to say - a mess.

Farmers who have spent decades in conservation schemes, who feel proud of what they have achieved, now feel let down and disillusioned by the bureaucratic mess that Countryside Stewardship has become.

I want to see schemes that encourage and inspire them to enhance the environment... not ones that turn them away, depressed with the complexity and form-filling..

The theme of this Conference is backing the future of British Farming.

So here's how I see our future.

Above all, we must be profitable.

Without profit, nothing else is possible.

That means a properly functioning supply chain.

Fair and without abuses.

I want to see our self-sufficiency growing and our exports increasing.

This is not wanting us to blindly produce more.

This is wanting to see demand rise and for British producers to meet that demand.

World market forces and volatility are not going to go away.

Secretary of State I know you want farming to be more competitive and resilient in a volatile world.

We do too.

But we need you to help us with the tools we need to succeed.

And these actions must be central, Secretary of State, to your forthcoming 25year Food and Farming Plan.

Secretary of State, I know you take these issues seriously.

You have championed Great British food in export markets and we are grateful.

Piecemeal action will not do.

That is why I am so pleased that you are publishing your 25year Food Plan very soon.

We need actions across all government departments, that give farmers a strong sense that farming and food production matters..

I want to see a future for British farming that will give every chance to the next generation - and I am delighted to see so many young farmers here today.

I want you to have the same opportunity to enter farming and to grow your businesses that I and my twin brother had.

The industry is at its best when its united – we have public support so let's use it and work together to make sure that every decision maker, every retailer, every member of government understands the importance of British Farming.

The NFU has backed the future of British farming for over a century.

Through good times and bad, through thick and thin.

The NFU will always Back the Future of British Farming.

Thank you all very much.