

NFU PRESIDENT MINETTE BATTERS SPEECH TO #NFU20

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good morning conference

I want to start by thanking my officeholder team. Guy, Stuart, John, and Aled.

It's been a rollercoaster year and I'm hugely indebted to all of you for your hard work and support.

It is very unfortunate that the Secretary of State, George Eustice can't be with us this morning as he's been called to a cabinet meeting.

However, he will give his keynote address tomorrow and take questions then.

This year will be the most significant year for British farming – for British food – in living memory.

2020 promises to be the biggest agricultural reform since the 1940s...

For the first time in decades this country has the opportunity to shape a trade, immigration and agricultural policy which will define our country for decades to come.

The future can either be seen as a threat.
Or an Opportunity.
Your glass is either half full or half empty.

Conference, farmers.
My glass - our glass - must be half full.

The future must be about building on the opportunity given, delivering for our people, our food and our planet.

We have the climate, geography, water and soils to produce every component of a balanced diet.

Healthy food,
healthy people and a healthy country.

But we are at a time of enormous, unprecedented change, this is the time for leadership.

To set out what we want from our country, what we want for future generations...

and how we are going to get there – together.

My vision is that British farmers and growers play our part in the global food and environmental challenge – that we step up to the plate and demonstrate how environmental and biodiversity delivery can go hand in hand with profitable food production.

A future where we feed the world without costing the earth.

We hear a lot of talk about the benefits of free trade... choice, price, availability.

You only have to walk into a supermarket to witness how successful free trade has been.

And I want to be clear - farmers are eager to make the most of the opportunities our new status as an independent trading nation presents.

But the great challenges of today – mitigating and adapting to climate change, arresting declines in biodiversity, ensuring our farmed animals are well cared for and treated with respect – are not going to be met by an economic model that places a premium on price and completely ignores the hidden costs of how that food is produced.

Back in 2017,
Michael Gove spoke of Brexit providing an “unfrozen moment” – a moment to seize the initiative.

Well that moment is now here.

This year the government must show global leadership, insist that UK farm standards are the benchmark for climate-friendly farming around the world, and that whoever wants to trade with us trades on our terms.

And we must not allow those standards to be undermined by imports of goods which would be illegal for our farmers to produce here.

In other parts of the world abattoirs use chlorine or other chemicals to wash carcasses – not allowed in Britain because we have legislation on the way we keep our livestock, limiting stocking density and we have rules on bio security, lighting, diet, veterinary oversight.

In the US and other countries there are no federal controls on what are deemed - in the UK - to be fundamental welfare requirements.

Battery cage egg production is still permitted in some countries – but was banned here in 2012.

Meat and bone meal in feed, which was banned here 24 years ago, is still allowed elsewhere.

In Brazil, farmers don't need a vet's prescription for animal medicines and don't need to record treatments.

There is no legislation in many parts of the world on the use of these drugs... in fact many feedlot systems are reliant on the prophylactic use of antibiotics.

And in Japan, Australia, China, Canada, Brazil, Malaysia and India the use of antibiotics is permitted for growth promotion.

This isn't "hysteria"

This isn't "mumbo jumbo"

This is fact.

To sign up to a trade deal which results in opening our ports, shelves and fridges to food which would be illegal to produce here would not only be morally bankrupt...

It would be the work of the insane.

This goes wider than what's good for farming.

This is about what's good for Britain.

So when the Prime Minister or any member of government is overseas discussing trade, our ask is that they start promoting British foods and the values we hold here about safety, quality and welfare.

Why would you actively encourage opportunities for countries where foot and mouth is endemic to have their beef as a centre piece on our tables?

This is a time to remember our food journey.

We now have the food standards act of 1999 - the outcome of which was the establishment of an independent food standards agency and red tractor assurance in 2000

In the last twenty years we've created one of the safest, shortest and most responsive food supply chains in the world.

Nine years ago

Prime Minister David Cameron set out his ambition to lead the world on beating anti-microbial resistance before we faced an apocalypse in human health treatment.

The responsible use of animal medicines – RUMA - was tasked with leadership and owning

the evidence base.

Last year Chief medical officer

Dame Sally Davis said at the world health innovation conference in Doha that through Red Tractor assurance Britain's farmers had triumphed in lowering their antibiotic usage by 53%.

A shining example of why a Global Britain must aim high on standards for trade.

Everything I have said is endorsed by consumer groups and environmentalists. The consumer organisation, Which, has just published its latest insight report which maintains that above all else standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection must at the very least be maintained.

Sixty environmental and farming organisations recently joined us and signed a letter to the Prime Minister that it was in the national interest of this country that we maintain our food standards.

But it is complicated.
It is technical.

I'm a realist.

I know that this will test the moral compass of some in government.

There are going to have to be some trade-offs and it would be a pipe dream to expect every country in the world to operate to the same rules and regulations.

What standards will we accept?

What is unacceptable?

It's an issue which can't be solved in 280 characters on twitter or in a quick soundbite.

Which is why it's absolutely vital there is a specialist body of experts set up to oversee trade regulations regarding agriculture and food.

A Trade and Standards Commission.

And it is vital that we have legislation which ensures these experts are listened to.

This isn't just about chlorinated chicken...

This is about a wider principle – we must not tie the hands of British farmers to the highest rung of the standards ladder ... whilst waving through food imports which may not even reach the bottom rung.

Conference you will remember last year I said to the then Secretary of State Michael Gove that I wanted a commitment to standards in writing.

He did write -
twice in fact and he did commit.

But since then some in government have said there is no need for a commission and no need for new laws

... When I asked why I was told because “the British public don’t want sub-standard food imported here”.

Well I agree...

the British public do not want food to be imported here which would be illegal to produce here...

which is exactly why it should be enshrined in law in the Agriculture Bill.

Why would government not want to legislate on this?

Why would government not want a commission of experts to advise?

If you demand high welfare systems at home but your actions undermine the farms that deliver it...

If you say we care about the environment here but then promote and support some of the world’s most environmentally damaging food systems.

If you raise the bar at home but refuse to legislate on imports....

then I can only wonder...

was the motive ever really about improving global standards in welfare or the environment after all?

Conference, remember my words we will rue the day that we step back from the food safety act of 1999 rather than moving forward to build a better industry.

If the government is serious about animal welfare and environmental protection and doing more than any previous government - it must put legislation in the Agriculture bill.

So what should our vision be for the future?

The EU is our closest trading partner and home to 62% of exports.

It will be always be in the UK and EU’s interests to have a zero tariff and quota trade agreement.

Government has been clear that the longer term relationship will not be fully aligned with EU rules and regulations and that this will mean some level of friction in trade between us.

As farmers we support the government ambition for a science and evidenced approach to decision making.

The opportunities that new plant breeding technologies will bring.

It is time to turbo charge our iconic British Food Brand - Red Tractor assurance remains crucial to maintaining honesty.

I will never tolerate a situation whereby we import cheap raw ingredients and add value to them under the Union Jack.

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board must focus on marketing the great story of British food and our ask –
our plea –
is for government to match fund our levy of 60 million pounds to deliver a transformed AHDB modelled on the Irish Board Bia food board.

Providing access to new technologies, research and development and, crucially, owning our own data and evidence so we can benchmark ourselves against the rest of the world.

AHDB must also be more ambitious on opening up new export opportunities for British farming around the world as well as making sure we remain the number one supplier of choice here in Britain.

And let's make sure crown commercial service contracts are committed to British sourcing for our schools, hospitals, prisons and MOD.

What is government waiting for?

What is more important to our economy our health our environment than the very food that we eat?

Britain needs a productive –
and profitable –
food and farming industry.

I know that every farmer wants to farm without support.
None of us want to be reliant on a brown envelope.

The NFU has said from day one that a prerequisite of stepping back from direct support must be ensuring the fairness, transparency and functionality of our supply chains - ensuring the voluntary codes are made mandatory, rolling out the GSCOP - including ornamentals

I'm pleased to see the Agriculture bill includes a commitment to monitor food security.

This needs to include a measure of self-sufficiency in it – an indicator as to whether Britain’s capacity to grow its own food has increased or decreased.

And that reporting needs to be annual – not just once every five years.

We are up for reform of agricultural policy.

But the timelines were mapped out in 2018 when the ambitions - and deadlines - for Brexit looked very different.

Things have changed - and so Defra's plans for transition must change too.

Last week I agreed with all the other UK farming unions that ending the transition period away from BPS must be delayed and should not begin until 2022 at the earliest.

The UK is the jewel in the world’s crown for producing high quality, extensive, climate friendly meat and dairy products.

I want an end to the victimisation by some activists against our livestock sector. People need to remember, at the heart of every farming business is a family. In a world where there seems to be increasing polarisation we mustn’t forget we’re all human.

I urge everyone – including the media - to stop and think about the real-life consequences of their actions and their words.

The UK hosts the COP, the UN climate change conference in November and it will be more important than any that have gone before.

Our chance, the Prime Ministers chance, to show the world that the UK is going to lead on de-carbonisation of the G7 - working with the farmers here to champion climate friendly farming, across the world, to lead the recovery our planet so desperately needs.

Climate change is a shared responsibility.

A global issue which requires us all to act

This is why I have set out an ambition for British farming to be net zero in emissions by 2040.

We start from a great place, British beef has a carbon footprint less than half that of the rest of the world.

Our pastures, hedges and trees act as a vital carbon sink.

Many more farmers want to understand how they can play their part and that's why we have a session tomorrow devoted to achieving net zero and launching our net zero "Farm Status Indicator" - to help members take an initial first step on their own net zero plans.

Conference, our farmers were deemed the first line of defence during two world wars.

Farmers will be the pioneers who will lead again as the first line of defence on climate change.

But I can't stand here today discussing climate change and not mention the national emergency that has unfolded before our very eyes in the last couple of weeks.

As the Yorkshire Post put it - Prime Minister - we are drowning. Thousands of hectares and countless communities devastated after months of heavy rain.

Too much water in some places and at times not enough water in others.

Often at the same time.

With all the talk of infrastructure spending on high speed rail or on connectivity surely the trick that we are missing is investment in water.

Very little has been done to improve our water infrastructure since the creation of the canals in the 1800s.

Years of neglect has created an urgent problem.

Defra's national water planning framework is welcome, and it's encouraging to see ambitious plans emerging for English water companies to move water around the country.

But government is going to have to bite the bullet and commit major funding to this whilst also ensuring farming has access to that water for food production.

And the prize is huge, not just in terms of better water management here but also abroad.

Yet another chance for the UK to be a global leader

We currently produce only 7% of fruit we eat and only 53% of our veg in the UK.

We import the rest from some of the most water stressed parts of the world like Israel, Chile and Spain.

I want to say that again, we have a bountiful supply of water, but we ask the rest of the world to use their scarce water supplies to produce the food that we could and should be growing at home.

We can and should drive a horticulture revolution, in support of our health and our global environment, but we need a revolutionary approach to how we plan, protect, and pay our farmers to store water, allowing water to be moved to areas where it's needed.

It is ironic that the government, on the one hand, is encouraging more people to increase the amount of fruit and veg in their diets.
..yet on the other hand making it much harder for that fruit and veg to be produced in Britain.

We need 70,000 seasonal workers in our horticultural sector...
a commitment to have a seasonal scheme for just
10,000 simply isn't enough.

And we urge government to increase it for 2021.
We have repeatedly said that for farm businesses it is about having the full range of skills needed – whether it's pickers and packers or meat processors and vets.

Millions of pounds is being invested in automation and mechanisation.

But there is no scaled up automation around this year – or next - that can replace the workers we need.

I've talked a lot this morning about change... whether it's the climate, politics or farming.

But society is changing too...
we are changing.

We are not an exclusive industry, as some would paint us, with an eye looking at the past.

We are modern and inclusive.

I was really keen that the NFU signs up to the Agrespect pledge and really pleased that we supported the amazing Pride Event in Brighton complete with rainbow tractor.
The fantastic event in Wales 'She Who Dares, Farms' plays a crucial role in encouraging more women to feel confident to take leadership roles within farming.

And we are now actually talking about mental wellbeing in a way we should have been doing decades ago.

We must continue to make sure the NFU opens up opportunities for any farmer to achieve their potential in representing this amazing industry.
And a special mention to our young ambassadors who are here whose enthusiasm and positive outlook remind me every day why I love farming.

You'll also see later this morning the opportunities that delivering farming in schools opens

up for the next generation... how we're encouraging children now to understand where their food comes from and to work in this great industry.

We're going to need these farmers of the future.

Both in Britain and throughout the world.
Because there is a growing market out there...

While I've been speaking, in the last 20 minutes the world has eaten around 100,000 tonnes of food.

This planet has to produce seven and a half million tonnes of food every day to keep the world's population fed.

Conference, Britain is a fantastic place to meet this challenge.

British farming is in a fantastic place to realise this opportunity.

History will judge Brexit.

My task is to make the best of what unfolds in the coming days, weeks, months and years and I give you my word today that the NFU will leave its heart and soul on the Brexit pitch - I will do everything in my power to lead this industry into a profitable productive and thriving future.

But I cannot do that alone, we all have a responsibility.

In meetings with Ministers, in Friday afternoon farm visits with MPs or on the 25th March at our mass rally.

This is your moment to make a stand with me to show your children and future generations for decades to come that you stood up for our future - to be world leaders on climate friendly farming

Farmers, we can do this.

Let's make British farming the envy of the world...
and let's start that journey right here, right now.

Thank you.