

**Meurig Raymond
NFU Conference Speech 2016**

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.

A lot of effort has gone into organising the next couple of days – it 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 audio visual 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 say stand here today to 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, their businesses and the wider rural economy. 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. In England the RPA struggled to deliver their promise of a majority paid by the end of December - and only then barely more than half of eligible farmers got paid - and only 30% of the money was delivered. 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 five 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 3 years. 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 and helped our farmer members speak to more people than ever before with much greater impact.

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.

If you want evidence of some of the NFU's achievements over the last year then please take a look at the NFU yearbooks available in the foyer. It's impressive stuff.

But I want to highlight a few 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 a farmer's carrot field in Yorkshire was flooded. 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. At every stage there have been voices saying what we'd achieved would make no difference. 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.

Who but the NFU could have surveyed over 15 hundred farmers to understand what problems they were facing applying for the BPS, and then use that clear message to Whitehall and Brussels to extend the application deadline?

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.

My determination is to see wildlife control become a normal and accepted practice of disease control.

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 see these aims as entirely mutually compatible objectives. 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.**

**I'd like to conclude by saying 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. Where
consumers chose to buy British because of
the quality and values that underlie our
production.**

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: encouragement to replace dated capital; a supply chain that shares risks and reward; access to markets in Europe and abroad and protection from unfair

competition, yes, and access to technology that our competitors already use. 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. But we need a comprehensive approach to the challenges we now face.

Piecemeal action will not do. That is why the NFU called for a comprehensive Food and Farming Plan in our Election Manifesto. 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.

