

talkingtilth

a word from the editor



No Goodwill to show?

Dear Mr Goodwill

The fact that you failed to turn up to represent the Government at the recent Cereals event was not just “disappointing”, as the NFU has put it. It smacks of the loathsome display of self interest that currently consumes Westminster, and particularly Conservative MPs.

You chose to support party politics over the industry that’s pushing Government for clarity and certainty, and the industry you’ve been appointed to represent, without even sending a replacement. That’s not just a desertion of office, it’s a woeful betrayal of the knowledge, talent and experience this country has in its industry, and particularly within the arable sector. Arable farmers are rapidly losing confidence in your ability, in that of other ministers and in MPs in general, in shaping the Agriculture Bill currently going through Parliament, and in putting in place a system that sufficiently incentivises and regulates in line with the Government’s 25 Year

Environment Plan.

It’s probably the remarkable resilience of the sector that masks the considerable challenges it currently faces and that you have been tasked with alleviating. But be in no doubt about the pressure farmers are under as you continue to remove tools from the agrochemical armoury. We don’t want to use chemicals to produce food any more than we have to, but these are the tools we use to do our job. If you take these away from us, you have to help us access technologies that will allow us to do our job better.

The problem is, you’re not even allowing that, and this is reflected in the Government’s current policy, inherited from the EU, on new plant-breeding technologies. It is deeply worrying that you view the voice of Greenpeace and of Friends of the Earth on such subjects with as much value as the view of scientists, as you indicated recently at Groundswell. This *has* to change.

If it doesn’t, minister, have you actually considered whether it’s possible for us to produce food to the standards you seem to expect at the price the consumer is willing to pay? Have you actually considered the consequence if UK arable farmers make a rational decision to stop producing food and apply their considerable talent elsewhere?

So it’s time to put the

interests of UK Farming and of those people you represent first. How you choose to demonstrate this is up to you, but I would suggest arable farmers will be judging you, the Government and MPs on your actions over the coming months as the harvest comes in.

Why? Because in living memory, there has never been a harvest of such uncertainty in so many ways. We will look for strong leadership to show us it’s a harvest that matters, that it represents the bounty of a country that takes pride in its world-leading standards of food production. We want to be sure we have political leaders who are not afraid in trade negotiations to stand firmly behind those standards and question leaders of other nations on how they maintain theirs. We don’t have that confidence at the moment, but you and your colleagues can earn it over the coming months.

You must also act to give our talented plant scientists the confidence they need to continue their research, particularly in the area of gene-editing in which they are currently world-leaders. This research is at a point that it is critical it comes into the field to be tested. It is simply ludicrous that we have in our labs and our greenhouses world-leading plant-science innovations that we’re restricted from testing in the field — no other country outside Europe faces those restrictions. So you must *promise* that, as soon as we exit the EU, you will allow a

derogation to allow this research to continue, unfettered by GMO regulations. This should be followed with an urgent review of the regulations themselves.

Finally, we must see evidence that Defra is truly committed to shaping an agricultural policy that will allow the arable sector to flourish. Progress towards Environmental Land Management contracts has stalled, and that’s deeply worrying. You have indicated what you won’t support, but you are sitting on 200 applications for the Tests and Trials and haven’t indicated to those who applied what you will support.

But this is not a plea for subsidy, minister, it’s a demand for direction. The arable sector is aware that the chemical era is coming to an end, that we’re in the plant-breeding era and that on the horizon lies digital. We’re already crippled as we’re being forced out of the first with no tools to enter the second, and that puts us behind the curve on the third. Act now, lead us, and you’ll find we have the inherent talent to catch up.

Tom Allen-Stevens has a 170ha arable farm in Oxon, and will not be completing Defra’s June survey until Government shows some reason why there’s any point in doing so.

tom@cpm-magazine.co.uk
@tomallenstevens



Alois POTTINGER UK Ltd
Phone 01536 272220
info.uk@pottingeruk.co.uk
www.pottingeruk.co.uk

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