

Thoughts from a Northern Mart September 2008

September Dries Ditches or Breaks Bridges

A Yorkshire farmer told me of this old saying on September weather; how true it is this year, as the Indian summer we all waited for disappears into the flooded rivers and waterlogged land. The land in the north of England (like many other parts of the country) is totally water logged; many farmers have worked excessive hours to try to salvage some grain from the weather. In a spell last week, when it did not rain as much, the combines were out all hours. One man I talked to managed 10 hours sleep in 6 days as he tried to salvage some wheat, rarely coming at less than 20% moisture and only stopping when it went over 25%.

The heroic efforts of this farmer have been reflected all over the country. I was disgusted to hear people complaining in my local market town about being kept awake by farmers harvesting late into the night! The farmers who could harvest were the lucky ones; others have to sit helplessly by as their land is too wet for the harvester to travel, or it is still raining in their area.

The problems brought by the wet time are not confined to the arable sector; many livestock farmers are struggling to gather second crop silage and hay, and, in some cases on the very high farms, first crops of hay and silage - with the added complication of the shortage of straw for animal bedding. The reason for this shortage is that straw breaks up more after being constantly wet; then, when dry it tends to shatter as it goes through the combine - farmers call this being rotten ripe. Farmers are also switching on the straw choppers on the combines in an effort to reduce compaction and if possible get on with cultivating and seeding to try to catch up with establishing next years crop, as well as the fertilizer value of returning the straw to the ground. All this does not help the livestock farmer looking for straw.

As always it is an ill wind that does not do somebody some good; the talk of the market today is of a large dairy farmer who has bought 400 tons of wheat from another farmer for £75 a ton because it is too wet to go through his dryer. The dairy farmer is crimping it and adding caustic soda which results in a very reasonably priced ration for his cows for the next year, when mixed with other products.

The stress that farmers and their families are under at the moment cannot be underestimated, with many people approaching breaking point. The remarks about farmers working all night can lead to a farmer going off the deep end. I would ask all of you reading these notes to be aware of the stress and strains farmers are under again, in many ways the pressure on the countryside are even greater than over the past years, when Foot and Mouth, Blue Tongue and flooding in certain areas ravaged our land. This year it is just Blue Tongue; but the waterlogging and flooding is everywhere.

Those of you reading these notes who are organising or leading Harvest festivals please remember that all is not safely gathered in yet and may not be for some time. In lots of instances next years crops would be sown and growing well by now. As the salvage operations continue to get the harvest in, next years planting gets put back, as in many cases the land is too wet for sowing even if it is cleared.

The harvest up the Dales and the autumn sales are just starting to get going with the big sale at Hawes of 28,000 mule gimmer lambs, selling for a better price than last year and achieving (in the careful words of one major breeder) a better trade than he expected but could still do better to make up for last year. Beef prices continue to be strong with a number of cattle at Thirsk mart selling for in excess of £2/ kilo with the best price of 207 pence a kilo. These prices have never been seen before, outside the Christmas show. Lamb is selling at a good price and has kept a good trade all summer. Pork and bacon have also showed a steady strengthening in price as the summer has gone on, this increase (coupled with the fall in cereal price) is very welcome to those farmers still left in pig production.

Milk production, after the welcome price increase of the last year, is now probably back to the same profit levels as a year ago after all the increase in input costs. It is a very worrying trend that the major supermarkets are starting to cut the price of milk in price wars. This price-cutting will only come out of one bank account and it will not be the Supermarkets or the processors but will be the producers. The price of cereals has slipped to around the £100 a ton level, partly on worries over the quality of the English harvest, but more significantly as a result of a good harvest elsewhere in the world - which really emphasises the global nature of farming today.

In all this stress and doom the farmers are still ever hopeful and are investing in more breeding stock and seed when at all possible and hoping that next year cannot be as bad - and ever mindful of that oft quoted verse of scripture that seed time and harvest will not fail. I was reminded of that marvellous piece of advice to a farmer 'Live as though you are going to die tomorrow but farm as though you are going farm forever.' With our prayers, thoughts and support and this good advice, farming will get over these troubled times.

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Useful Harvest Resources

www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk

www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk

www.britishfoodfortnight.co.uk

www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/publications/rural_worship/index.html

www.crc-online.org.uk

www.wakefield.anglican.org/support/issues/rural/index.htm

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