

Letter from Westminster

by Winchester MP Steve Brine

Views of harvest during August remind us that agriculture is a key component of the local economy, employing a great many people.

Last month I wrote in broad terms about Brexit but highlighted three specific areas of interest I have as we negotiate a safe exit from the EU. In future columns I will say more about the City and the environment but this time I want to focus on the future of British farming.

In the aftermath of the vote I reached out to farmers and the local NFU (chaired by Michael Gray) to ensure I understand their perspective and can represent it faithfully to Ministers. I value the dialogue and will watch closely for the outcome of the NFU's largest members' consultation in a generation as they garner views on what is needed from a future domestic agricultural policy.

Farming already makes a major contribution to the UK and is the bedrock for a vibrant supply chain that is essential for our food and drink industry, worth some £100 billion to the economy. I believe this industry can embody the 'opportunity' of Brexit as we shape a new vision for an agricultural policy which ensures a dynamic, profitable and productive future. British farmers and growers already produce high quality food to

world leading standards while caring for a thriving environment so we've great strength to build upon.

Reading some of the things written since June 23, you could be forgiven for thinking everything with an EU stamp on it is golden but I haven't met many people who think the Common Agricultural Policy - or indeed some aspects of how DEFRA operates - is an unchallenged success.

Readers may wish to look for the State of Nature report this month in which no less a figure than Sir David Attenborough talks about the crisis facing more than 120 species because of the industrialisation of agriculture driven by subsidies. "Brexit means we have a chance to change this" it will say.

So while I was pleased to see the new Chancellor guarantee the current level of agricultural funding under CAP will be upheld until 2020 that is only to be as part of the transition to new domestic arrangements.

This gives crucial certainty to farmers and means any agri-environment schemes agreed before the 2015 Autumn Statement will be fully funded but the Government should now seize the chance to construct new farming policies which support those producing food - and enhancing the natural environment - rather than the complex area-based payments system currently in force. And yes, Ministers should listen to farmers who say they are in favour of gradually moving to subsidy-free world.

It is medium-sized family farmers who are the backbone of the industry but have struggled most under the CAP, while the major landowners have done best. Perhaps we should consider moving back to a headage system, providing a decent baseline income for a family farm?

We should definitely move to a world where farmers work under a simplified, less regulated regime. Current estimates say half a billion pounds a year of support money from the EU is being soaked up by bureaucrats turning Brussels directives into complicated regulations that are a nightmare for producers.

Finally, immigration and farming. The current industry, certainly the fruit sector, would struggle without foreign labour. The post-Brexit settlement must allow these workers to come here while at the same time making farming jobs more attractive to British workers.

1.9.2016